

Historical Adventure

GOLDEN FLEECE

20¢

MAY



THE SEA DRINKS BLOOD
by H. BEDFORD-JONES

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

COUNT GASPAR by E. CHARLES VIVIAN



"Two men and one horse! Jacobo, I crave pardon. 'Tis no toy, but a very mangonel—see how they scatter for cover, down there!"
Drawn by Harold W. McCauley for "Count Gaspar"

GOLDEN FLEECE

HISTORICAL ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

MAY 1939

Vol. 2 No. 5

A COMPLETE NOVEL

- COUNT GASPAR**.....E. Charles Vivian 2
A Mantuan Don Quixote Lays Siege to a Place of Devils. Illustrated by Harold W. McCauley.

SHORT STORIES

- IN THE MOUTH OF A CANNON**.....Harwood Steele 67
"Vengeance on the Governor!" Cries the Sieur de Lacklands. Illustrated by Maurice Archbold, Jr.
- THE SEA DRINKS BLOOD**.....H. Bedford-Jones 74
Carlos de Suarez Weighs the Honor of Portugal Against Liquid Rajput Eyes. Illustrated by Jay Jackson.
- THE COMING OF THE GOTHs**.....R. A. Emberg 92
- II OF THE EMPIRE BREAKERS**
Shieldwall Death, a Warrior's Choice, or Hunger Death, a Craven's Choice?
Illustrated by James Carr.
- BLIZZARD SNACK**.....Anthony Rud 103
Half the Kingdom of the Wild Tries to Eat, and the Other Half Not to Be Devoured. Illustrated by Don Nelson.
- THE BATH OF KING MINOS**.....Clyde B. Clason 109
Further Light on Theseus and the Divine Ariadne. Illustrated by Maurice Archbold, Jr.

MISCELLANEOUS

- TRIREMES**Allen Fiske 91
- THE THIN RED LINE**.....Robert James Green 124

DEPARTMENT

- THE ROUND TABLE**..... 127

COVER DESIGN

Painted by Harold W. McCauley for "Count Gaspar."

These stories are fiction. If any character bears the name of a living person, it is purely a coincidence.

A. J. Gontier, Jr.

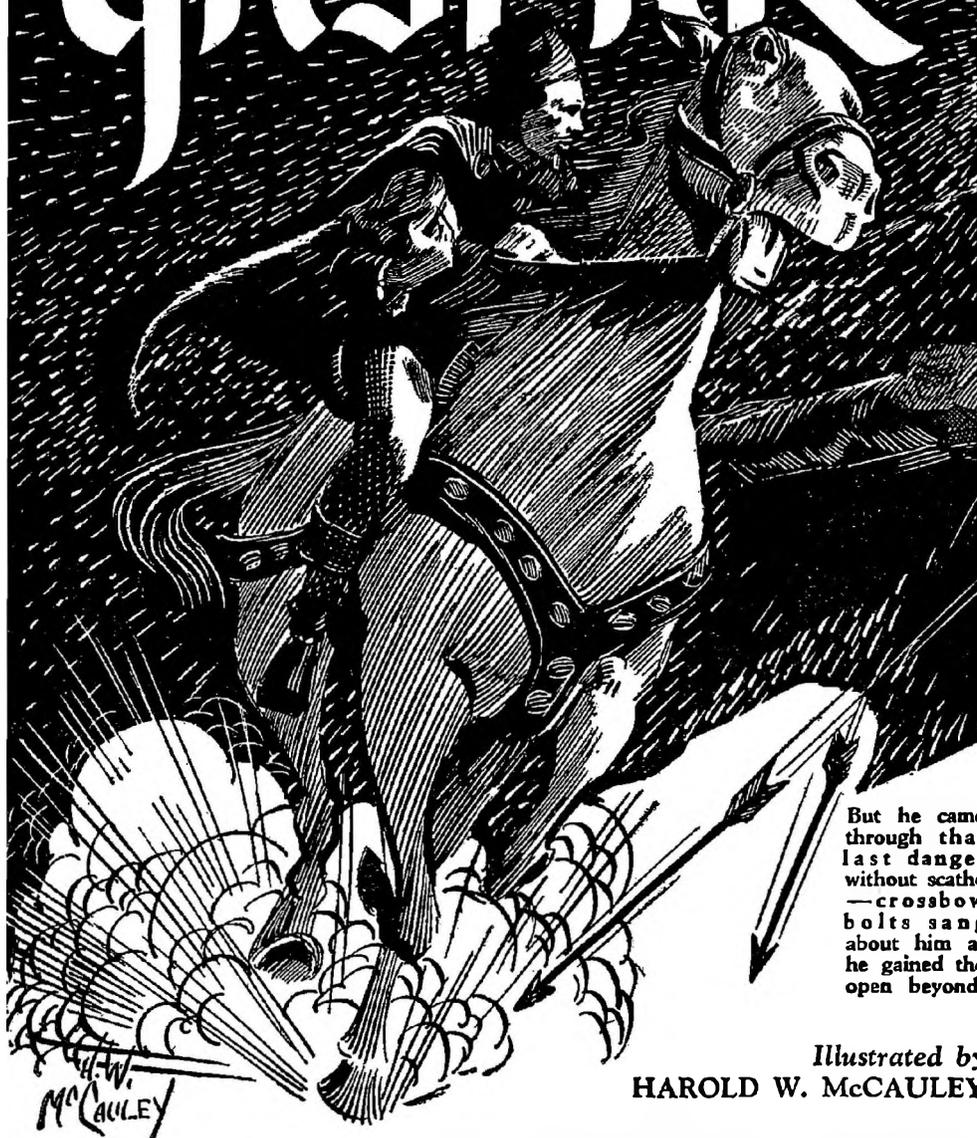
ASSOCIATE EDITORS
J. H. Bellamy, Business Manager

C. G. Williams

Published monthly by Sun Publications. Executive and Editorial Offices, Rand McNally Bldg., 538 So. Clark St., Chicago, Illinois. Copyright 1939 by SUN PUBLICATIONS. Entered as second class matter August 19, 1938, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title Registration applied for at United States Patent Office. Single copy price 20c. Subscriptions in the United States and Canada \$2.00 per year. Foreign Postage \$1.00 a year extra. Notice to Writers and Artists: When submitting material, please enclose stamped and self-addressed envelope for return if not acceptable. Although care will be exercised in handling unsolicited material, the publishers cannot accept responsibility for its safe return.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

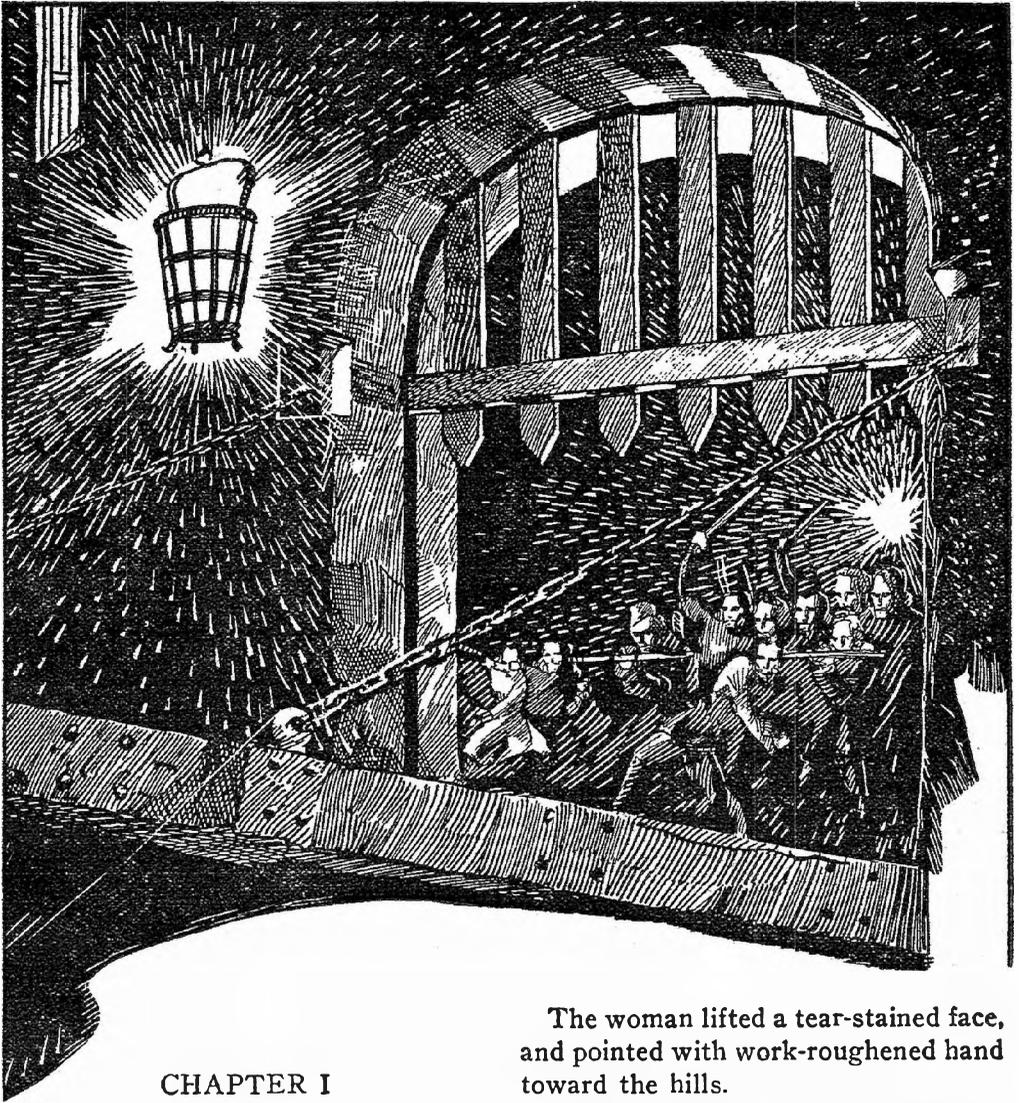
COUNT GASPAR



But he came
through that
last danger
without scathe
— crossbow
bolts sang
about him as
he gained the
open beyond.

Illustrated by
HAROLD W. McCAULEY

by E. CHARLES VIVIAN
2



CHAPTER I

VITTORIO DELLA PORTA reined in his charger where, under a gnarled tree, a woman wept over the body of a man. He was young and long-limbed, this della Porta, and he carried himself alertly, as would a man of his time trained in arms and horsemanship. Behind him Benedetto, his serving man, also reined in, awaiting his young master's will.

"Whose work?" Vittorio asked, seeing how the blood had run and dried on the man's shabby doublet.

The woman lifted a tear-stained face, and pointed with work-roughened hand toward the hills.

"Count Gaspar's, lord," she answered tearfully, and Vittorio, looking where she pointed, saw the battlements of a castle rising among the hills to northward.

"The fifth," said Vittorio, half in a muse. He meant that, on his way from Mantua to Savona, this was the fifth evil deed that he had heard attributed to this Count Gaspar. Milan was far away, Florence farther still; beyond the governments of the towns, each of which was a small state in itself almost, the country was for any who

chose to pillage and slay, for the times were stark.

Benedetto, Vittorio's serving man, drew near and dismounted without awaiting his master's bidding. The woman, in the numbed fashion that comes of long grieving, watched how Benedetto bent and touched her man's face. Again she looked up at Vittorio, and the innate nobility of this young stranger told her that, peasant woman though she was, she might tell her story without fear.

"Lord," she began, "he had gone with our only child to find a strayed goat. Count Gaspar himself came this way with his men—I came in time to see how they went off, carrying with them our little Giulio,"—here her voice checked on a sob—"and one of the men had slung the carcass of the goat across his saddle. They will train up our little Giulio to follow such evil ways as their own. Oh!"—she stood up suddenly and stretched out her hands toward the distant castle—"it is a place of devils, not of men!"

Again she crouched down beside her dead to weep. Vittorio looked at the castle that gloomed from the hills.

"It is the work of an army," he told himself. "Yet, can a man pass this by and then speak freely with his own soul?"

Benedetto caught part of the murmured query, and, understanding, looked keenly at his young master. At their setting out from Mantua, Vittorio's father had bidden the serving man be careful of his young master's errant fancies and quixotisms, and, to Benedetto, this wayside murder was no affair of theirs.

Such things were common enough; if the woman had but reached the scene of the tragedy a little more quickly,

the chances were that Gaspar's men would have prisoned her as well as the boy, for there were traces of youth and comeliness still about her. So thought Benedetto, and to him it would have seemed better if things had thus fallen out.

"Woman," said Vittorio, "I cannot restore to you your husband, but my sword and wit may win you back your child."

Benedetto started up, protest in every line of his strong face. "It is the work of an army, master," he said, echoing Vittorio's own words.

"There are times, good Benedetto, when a brain is more than an army," Vittorio retorted composedly, smiling as he spoke, "and here is need of that Christian charity which is so scarce in these plains."

"Lord," asked the woman, scarcely able to believe this miracle of a man having compassion, "is this truth?"

Vittorio considered her gravely. "Benedetto here shall give your man burial," he said, "and in three days, at this same hour, I will restore to you your boy Giulio, here by the cypress tree."

HE LOOKED up at the castle as he spoke with all the splendid, unreasoning self-confidence of youth. An older man would have added, "If I still live," or "By the grace of God," or some such phrase, but this youth—already life had made him more man than youth, in spite of his bare twenty-two summers—hedged not at all from the frank promise, thought not at all of the possibility of failure.

What lay between this hour and the restoration of the child, he who had never seen Count Gaspar or stood before his castle could not tell. Yet he

gave the promise of a della Porta, and Benedetto looked up at the sky as if to ask for witness that he was no party to such spring madness.

"Nay, but—my master—" Benedetto began to expostulate. But Vittorio was gazing thoughtfully toward the squat front of the distant castle, set back into the hills that frowned behind it. He made a gesture of impatience, and Benedetto awaited his pleasure. The woman looked up with wondering hope in her eyes at the splendid figure on the great chestnut horse.

"Master—your father—I also gave a promise—" said Benedetto pleadingly. "If you take this quest, and I go back alone—" but Vittorio turned on him.

"Who serves, Benedetto, and who leads?" he interrupted. "You shall, if you will, give account to my uncle when we reach Savona, but here on the way I brook no questioning."

At that Benedetto kept silence. Again Vittorio looked at the castle, and at the sun beyond the hill crests.

"You shall make a grave and lay the man within," he ordered, "and meanwhile we will rest the horses. It is not in my mind to arrive at Count Gaspar's hold before sunset."

"Lord," said the woman, "the way winds about the hills, and though the castle looks but a league away, yet it is five leagues by the road since the floods broke down the bridge beyond Sercona hamlet."

She spoke in a different tone from that which Vittorio had first heard from her, for the possibility of recovering her boy put hope in her heart—and, in truth, Vittorio was of those who inspire hope. Of a race of tall men and fair women, with a face that bespoke truth, and with the gift of youth still his, she saw him sit the chestnut

charger, and it seemed to her that even against Count Gaspar's strength this man might prevail to win back her boy.

"Five leagues," Vittorio echoed, thoughtfully. "Benedetto shall stay here to give your man burial, while I push on steadily. I will singe the beard of this Gaspar."

"If you go not steadily, Lord Vittorio," Benedetto growled, "I shall never catch you up."

"You will join me here, by this cypress tree, at this same hour, three days hence," Vittorio bade. "This quest is for one man alone or for an army, and we have no army. If I do not return within the stated time, go on to Savona and acquaint my uncle that this Count Gaspar holds me, alive or dead."

"Master, I pray you—" Benedetto implored, for he had held the child Vittorio in his arms in years gone, and had watched him come to the estate of man. But Vittorio shook his head.

"I were less than man if I let this pass, Benedetto," Vittorio said. "A man may be slain, perhaps, but that a child should be made corrupt in a nest of brigands—no!"

He turned again to the woman. "Your Giulio—how shall I know him?" he asked.

She looked him squarely in the face. "A boy of ten," she said, "with his hair close cropped. For the rest, having looked on me, you shall know him, lord."

"Now that," Benedetto growled to himself, "is a woman of sense. Most of them would have wasted many words and not told so much."

"I will bring him back to you," Vittorio said, and turned his horse away toward the hills, without further farewell to Benedetto. That worthy, strong

as the gnarled cypress under which he stood, lifted the body of the dead man in his arms, and bore it away for burial. "After which charity," he told the woman, "mayhap you will find me shelter for my horse and a fire of sticks to make me my supper, and then, it may be, a shrine at which to pray for my lord's safe emergence from this foolhardiness of his."

MEANWHILE Vittorio rode on through the last afternoon sunlight, and until the shadows came to him from the crests of the hills. In the tiny hamlet of Sercona he drew rein by a wayside rivulet that his horse might drink, and a few score yards farther on he came to the broken bridge that had spanned a mountain torrent until the floods of the preceding spring had broken it down.

Beyond it the track ran level for some way toward Count Gaspar's hold, but with the bridge broken there was no way across the torrent, and Vittorio perforce set his horse at the steep and rough ascent that wound beside the torrent and its ravine a league farther up in the hills, where was another crossing. On the far side of the bridge Vittorio crossed himself at the tinkle of the Angelus; before him frowned Count Gaspar's hold, now but a half-hour's ride away, and as yet there was in his mind no settled plan as to how he should find and rescue the boy Giulio.

He came, in the dusk, out from shadowing trees on to a level of plateau, a sward fit for tournament or game, bounded at its far side by such another ravine as that beyond Sercona, where the bridge was broken. Across this sward the track led plainly to Count Gaspar's glooming castle, which was

set on the far side of the ravine with its back against sheer cliff.

There was no need for moat or artificial defence, for behind the castle the cliff towered impassably, while before it the ravine made safety, and, if any would attack across the sward to bridge the ravine, crossbowmen in the castle could shoot them down, while to either side of the drawbridge was a culverin hooded from the evening damps. A darkening of the rock behind the castle at one point showed that there was no want of water, and, capably provisioned, the place could stand any siege. Still less, in seeing it, did Vittorio see how he should bring the boy Giulio forth.

Straight and fearlessly toward the let-down drawbridge he rode, and up to the arched gateway on the near side of the ravine. Here an armed guard stayed his coming, and questioned.

"I am Vittorio della Porta, benighted in the hills," he answered. "I crave but shelter for the night."

The guard called one of his fellows, and bade him ask their master what should be done. Evidently this visitor was from some distance, for the sheep of these parts refrained from coming too near the wolves' den.

They took news of Vittorio's coming to where, in a tapestried closet that led out from his great hall, Count Gaspar sat throwing dice with a favorite page. He had bidden the page throw with him for sport, and, each time that the boy threw higher than himself, he cursed; if, on the other hand, he himself threw higher, he jeered; for that was Count Gaspar's way.

He was big as Vittorio's man Benedetto, and as strong; he had a mop of tangled golden hair, and a little golden beard, and mild eyes that belied the



"Oh!" she stretched out her hands toward the distant castle—"it is a place of devils, not of men!"

H.W.
McCaul

man, over the beak of a nose. Between Milan and Savona, and even to Parma, his name was known, and it was said of him that the falsity of a woman had turned him against his kind and made his a name of fear in the plains that his castle overlooked.

"Della Porta?" he queried, when the man of the guard brought him word of Vittorio. "I have cause to know that name. Conduct him to me."

VITTORIO, waiting and wondering how he should compass his end—for with the rashness of youth he had come to the castle trusting to circumstance to guide him through the adventure—gave over the chestnut charger to the guard, and followed to Gaspar's presence.

"Greeting, young sir," said Gaspar. "You come as envoy?"

"I come benighted, trusting to your hospitality," Vittorio answered, "and searching for a peasant lad, one Giulio—one of my following as was his father."

The words were spoken on impulse—craft alone could serve him, Vittorio knew, and the less appearance of craft he gave, the better for his purpose. Gaspar eyed him keenly, and decided that he knew nought of the sword thrust that had ended the life of Giulio's father.

"Now was that a swart child, with cropped black hair?" Gaspar asked, in no way abashed.

Vittorio bowed assent.

"One of my men reported finding such a child," Gaspar said, "but the morrow is sufficient time for that. I will bid that you be found food and wine, Vittorio—della Porta."

He hesitated long on the name, and rolled it mockingly on his tongue, as

if he had found something that pleased him evilly.

"And the child?" Vittorio asked.

"If he is of your following, seeing that you are of Mantua, and this child was found but a little way beyond Sercona, we will see if he can be found," said Count Gaspar smoothly.

"And am not I, with all my following, but a little way from Sercona?" Vittorio asked with equal calm.

Count Gaspar rose. "Let us not waste words until you have eaten and slept," he said. "I will give orders that your horse shall be cared for, and, if you will, you shall eat with me."

He led the way, the page following Vittorio, out through the great hall to an apartment on the far side, where his serving men had laid out a meal. The room was hung with tapestries of price, and furnished with every luxury that the age could give, for Count Gaspar had ransacked many homes since he made his castle a place of fear. He made a sign to the page, and the boy went out and left them.

Gaspar held a goblet of Venetian glass up to the light. "Try you this Capri," he bade. "See how the prisoned sun shines in it, and then as you drink it you shall taste the sun—the warmth of the plains in summer. Capri—there was a della Porta in Capri, when I was younger—mayhap Capri holds a della Porta yet."

Vittorio thought and remembered. "That is surely my father's brother," he said.

COUNT GASPAR leaned back. "My wife's father," he said, "and now a della Porta comes to me—of his own will."

So meaningly and mockingly he looked at his guest that there was no

mistaking his intent. The story of Count Gaspar's wife went darkling in Vittorio's mind, a half-forgotten jumble of the man's cruelty and the woman's flight from him with some other man. They two were unarmed, save for their daggers, for Vittorio had left his sword in the great hall, and Gaspar had worn no sword as he sat with the page. As for struggle, Vittorio would have stood no chance against the other's giant brawn.

"A della Porta comes to you," Vittorio echoed, and Gaspar saw that he had not yet begun to fear.

"I wonder," Gaspar taunted, "what ransom your father will pay."

"No doubt you have a figure in your own mind," Vittorio suggested.

Gaspar considered him. "I rate you at eight thousand crowns," he said at last.

At that Vittorio shook his head. "Would you beggar our estate?" he asked. "Leave a little against the day when another della Porta comes to you."

"I would beggar your estate as a woman of your race beggared me of hope," Gaspar answered. "Eight thousand crowns, or you hang."

Vittorio leaned his elbows on the table, and fingered the half-emptied goblet of Capri that was beside him. "Della Portas do not hang," he said.

Gaspar leaned forward and stared hard at him. "Were money not so scarce," he answered, "this one would hang without let or question—but I need eight thousand crowns."

Vittorio drummed on the table with his fingers while his host lifted his goblet and drank. Then in turn Vittorio took up his goblet, drank from it a little and dashed it with all his force in Gaspar's face. Yet scarce had the

wine splashed ere Vittorio had his hands on Gaspar's throat, having leaped catlike over the board between them. His weight bore the other to the floor, and there his grip held on the stunned man's throat, though for a space Gaspar half-recovered strength and nearly threw his opponent off.

It was but a matter of minutes before the big Count gurgled and lay still, when Vittorio turned him over on his face, drew his arms together, and knotted a napkin round his wrists. Then, as Gaspar was recovering, he swung him over on his back, went to the door and shot the bolt. When Gaspar's eyes opened again Vittorio was seated on the floor beside him, with a naked dagger within an inch of his throat.

"If you call out it is the last call," said Vittorio. "Capri is a useful wine if the goblet be heavy enough."

Gaspar shifted a foot, but Vittorio's dagger scratched his throat, and he stilled. There came a fumbling at the door.

"Bid them leave us alone," Vittorio commanded, speaking low lest any outsider should overhear.

Since Count Gaspar hesitated, the dagger pricked him again, and at that he growled out that he was not to be disturbed. Retreating footsteps sounded.

"**A**ND now what?" Gaspar jeered. "You hold me, but the castle holds you. 'Twas a cunning move—Saint Peter, how my throat aches!—but a useless one."

"Quiet!" Vittorio bade. "I must think."

His eyes went round the room and back to Gaspar's face. "No ransom,

now," said Gaspar, "but it is your life or mine."

"I know," Vittorio answered—they understood each other thoroughly. "Now stand with your back to me."

Having no choice, Gaspar obeyed, after Vittorio's dagger had marked his throat again. But by this time his teeth were grinding with such rage that Vittorio thought it well to watch him closely.

"My life or yours," said Vittorio, "but at any move to thwart me you shall die very suddenly, Count Gaspar. Move to the corner by the alcove there."

Gaspar went; half way to the corner he paused and almost swung round, but the dagger pricked him again, and he thought better of it. There Vittorio plucked down a silken cord that looped a curtain over the alcove so swiftly that his dagger was again pricking at Gaspar's throat before Gaspar had realized his intent.

"Now to the ground again, face downward," Vittorio bade.

"I move no more," Gaspar answered. "Stab if you will, for it brings your own death on you. This game is played out."

For answer Vittorio, having foreseen this, knocked his host on the temple with the haft of his dagger, as Benedetto had taught him to stun men. When Gaspar opened his eyes again the silken cord bound his legs, and his arms were trussed more securely behind him. He looked up in a dazed way—memory had not fully come back to him.

Vittorio took a flagon from the table and tasted its contents, while the bound man watched him. It was, as he had thought, cognac of France, raw spirit that stung his throat like fire. He held the flagon to Gaspar's lips.

"Drink," he bade.

Gaspar gulped down a great draught of the cognac, and gulped again. The stuff brought a flush on his face, and at that Vittorio saw the end of the road before him.

"A brave thirst," he said. "Go on drinking," and again he held the flagon to Gaspar's lips.

Having been half-throttled and then stunned, the Count gulped down the spirit to revive himself, and only when the flagon was near empty did he perceive, from the smile on Vittorio's face, how this kindness was intended. It was then too late, as he knew full well, for already the liquor gripped at his shaken senses.

"What a death you shall die, della Porta!" he said thickly.

Vittorio laughed, sitting beside him. The night was young yet, and the boy Giulio was to find.

"In good time," he answered. "But now, ere you grow too drunk to speak—"

He paused, for again there came a rustling by the door.

"The Count would have you wait there till our discussion is ended," Vittorio called, "for then he will have need of you."

This he said with his hand pressed hard on Gaspar's mouth, lest the Count should by one cry ruin his chance of freedom. But Gaspar, rapidly growing drunk, snorted breath through his nostrils, and it was with ease that Vittorio stuffed in his mouth the napkin with which he had first bound Gaspar's wrists, before he got the silken cord from the alcove curtain.

NOW, having his man gagged and securely bound, Vittorio dragged him so that the board at which they

had sat to eat was between Gaspar and the door, and again tapped him on the temple with his dagger haft, though he hardly deemed that precaution necessary. Then he went to the door, slid back the bolt, and, so standing that he filled the opening, looked out to the dimness of the great hall and the one who had come to the door.

"Saints, but Gaspar's wines are strong!" he said, "and more so for a man who must ride again." He made the words come thickly and uncertainly, and lurched a little as he grasped the lintel. "But—" his eyes, fitting themselves to the dimness of the hall, showed him who stood without—"but—this chamber is no place for you, signorina," he stammered. "We—we have drunk too deeply. Bid them send a serving man to do the Count's bidding."

She was little more than a child who faced him, but her eyes took and held his own so that he felt that this craft and plotting, even to such an end, was a thing of shame. The fine oval of her face showed whitely beautiful in the half-light, and Vittorio wondered that a thing so pure and young could exist in this haunt of brigandage. There was sorrow, and a trace of fear, in her dark eyes, into which Vittorio stared until her lashes fell for maiden shyness.

"Yet," he said, "I would ask your name ere you go, if I dared."

"Ginevra Alderoni, signor," she said, and the words came to him like music.

"May the fates send that we meet again!" he answered as she turned away.

Forgetful, almost, of his own danger, he watched her cross the great hall, but the sight of a surly-looking servitor whom she sent to him recalled him to the needs of the present. There

came no sign from the room behind him, and he summoned back his wits to sway and look drunken.

"Count Gaspar and I have settled the details," he said to the man, with a hiccough. "My charger is to be saddled, and you are to have ready the little lad whom you took to-day, tight bound and with his eyes bandaged, for me to take away. My mission is to dispose of the child away from the castle, you understand—he is not to be harmed here. Return when all is prepared."

On this he knew he risked all, but the man departed to obey unsuspectingly enough. Then came the page whom Gaspar had sent away, cheekily, after the manner of pages, humming a tune. Him Vittorio let enter the room, knowing that a keen-witted youngster might prove a danger if let go. Once within, he choked the youngster to unconsciousness, and then with his dagger cut strips from the curtain, gagged the page securely, and bound him hand and foot to his snoring, wheezing master, whom the cognac had drugged past waking for the time. This was easy work, well finished by the time the servitor returned to announce that the saddled charger and the bound boy waited.

Vittorio slipped a gold piece into the man's hand. "Now I need my sword and cloak," he said, "and then all is well."

He closed, but dared not lock, the door of the room in which Gaspar and the page lay gagged and bound. The serving man held his cloak for him, and conducted him to where, at the inner end of the drawbridge, his charger blinked and snorted at the torches held by men of the guard. Vittorio handed out more coins among them, mounted the horse, and took the

bound and blindfolded boy up before him.

A GIRL came swiftly through the men, who fell back to make way for her. She laid a hand on Vittorio's knee.

"What is this child's fate?" she asked. "I am sick of these foul deeds of my guardian."

Vittorio bent low as his burden would allow, and, meeting her gaze for the second time, knew that for him earth held no face so fair.

"For your ear alone," he said, "I, Vittorio della Porta, promise that the child shall know no scathe, despite Count Gaspar's will."

He shifted the reins to the hand that held the child, and, reaching down, grasped her hand in his own.

"Ginevra—star in the murk of Gaspar's hold—even had I meant evil, your eyes had stayed it. And this is not farewell between us—we shall meet again."

While, bending toward her, he held her hand and gaze, there came a clamor from behind him. "Up drawbridge. Stop him!" shrieked the page's voice. At that Vittorio straightened in his saddle and drove the chestnut charger straight at the only man whom chance had set in front of him.

The man started aside—Vittorio felt the drawbridge begin to rise as he saw the rest of the guard come clattering out from the guardhouse at its far end. But he won through that last danger without scathe—crossbow bolts sang about him as he gained the open beyond, where he laid the reins down on his charger's neck, knowing that the good brute would find the road with more certainty than would his rider.

A league or so from Gaspar's castle he slackened his headlong pace, certain that Gaspar would send out no pursuit in the dark. And now carefully he went over in thought all the ways and apartments of the castle that he had seen, stamping them all on his memory as clearly as might be lest in any case he might go that way again. For Ginevra's face, needing no recalling, stamped itself on his heart, and from the surrounding darkness her eyes seemed to look full into his—he was young, and, till the last hour, heart-whole.

"Ginevra Alderoni," he whispered the name to the night. "They are of Ferrara, the Alderoni—how comes this white flower to blossom in Gaspar's slough of thievery?"

The night gave him no answer beyond the memory of Ginevra's eyes. Steadily he rode down into the plain, on past the cypress tree where this adventure had begun, and on yet, till he came to the monastery of San Paolo, where with Benedetto he had stayed to eat in the last noon hour. There he rang the monastery bell, after he had unbound the frightened child Giulio.

"I crave two days of shelter from Count Gaspar, father," he said to the monk who came to the gate. "Two days of shelter and silence for a della Porta of Mantua. At the end of that time this child and I have a tryst to keep."

Leading his horse and carrying the child Giulio, he passed within the gate.

CHAPTER II

ANDREA, page to Count Gaspar, took quill and inkhorn at his master's command, and wrote as Gaspar dictated:

"From my castle above Sercona, to my kinsman Rafael Montani, of the town of Savona. Greeting and all goodwill.

"This I send in charge of three of my men, to acquaint you that a certain Vittorio della Porta travels to Savona. I would have you deal with him in such a way as befits our common purpose. This Vittorio, overlooking the enmity that must always exist between his house and mine, came to this my castle above Sercona concerning a child of peasant stock, and I held him to ransom, yet treated him not evilly, but gave him fair harborage. In this I was too trusting, for he stunned me with a flagon of my own wine, bound me, and by craft escaped, bearing with him the peasant child, which was mine by right of capture. This befell but yesterday, and the scouts whom I sent out inform me that Vittorio travels to Savona, with but one serving man.

"Thus shall you know him when he comes: He is about my own height, but slim, near beardless, and of proud bearing, carrying himself alertly, with straight-gazing brown eyes, riding a chestnut charger, and of a countenance like that della Porta of Capri whose worthless daughter I married. His serving man is of similar height, riding a black steed but little inferior to that of his master, and this serving man is of great strength, bulky, black-haired and black-eyed. More of him I cannot tell you, since his master alone came to this my castle above Sercona.

"Judge you, Rafael, whether such a one as this should go free, having bound and held me in my own castle. The story is known among my men, else had I not set it forth thus freely, even to you my kinsman. You, I doubt not, can find poison or some craft in Savona which shall render the earth lighter by the loss of this Vittorio della Porta, to which end I write.

"In her absence, I send you the greetings of my ward Ginevra, who grows fairer each day, and will make you a fitting wife, Rafael, when she shall be fully come to the estate of womanhood. This I know is your heart's desire, and it shall be my desire too if you deal with this della Porta in fitting fashion.

"Given at my castle above Sercona, and despatched with the love that honorable men should ever bear to each other."

To this the Count, whose calligraphy was of an indifferent order, scrawled a signature, and, later, impressed the cover with his own seal. Then, to Andrea the page—

"Now, if you so much as mention the name of Vittorio della Porta, save

to tell me of his death or capture, I will have you flayed."

There was little need for the caution, for Vittorio had bound and gagged Andrea beside his master, when he rescued the peasant child from the castle; Andrea's hate was of about equal measure, and, if Count Gaspar bore on his face the scars from the wine flagon with which Vittorio had stunned him, Andrea had bruises on his throat where Vittorio's fingers had choked before gagging him. A sense of injury was in the hearts of both master and man.

Count Gaspar thought deeply as he looked at the letter.

"Will thick-headed Rafael know the man?" he questioned.

"If I went with the bearers—Of the three in the castle who will know this—this devil again, I am the second," Andrea suggested.

"Three?" Gaspar echoed sharply. "Who is the third?"

"The Lady Ginevra saw and had speech with him—I know not what they said," Andrea answered, meaningly.

Gaspar, glooming, thought again.

"You, Andrea," he bade, "shall accompany the bearers of this letter to my kinsman, to point out our quarry and avoid possibility of error—nay, but you yourself shall take the letter, guarded by the three. Go now and make ready, but first send the Lady Ginevra to me."

WITHIN a little time of the page's going, Ginevra came to her guardian where he waited in the little, richly furnished chamber of the castle in which Vittorio had outwitted him.

"I am told, Ginevra, that you had speech with last night's marauder," Gaspar said, harshly.

"I saw one Vittorio della Porta, but no marauder," Ginevra answered. Gaspar's men were wont to say of her that her courage was great as her beauty, and that of all in Gaspar's grim hold she alone dared give him back word for word.

Gaspar frowned at the name. "So?" he mocked, "and you have his name and state all pat? Was your converse long and intimate?"

Ginevra flushed at the sneer. "I saw him, feigning to be drunk, here at the door of this room in which he had bound you, for an instant," she said. "Again I saw him at the entry to the drawbridge, as he sat his horse and bore in his arms the child you had kidnapped. Thinking that he bore the child away at your will, I besought him that no harm should befall it. That, and no more, passed between me and a very gallant gentleman."

"Sits the crow on that tree?" Gaspar snorted wrathfully. "My faith, Ginevra, but you try me hardly, and the sooner you are wedded to Rafael, taken in hand and tamed, the better."

Ginevra laughed. "Rafael?" she asked, and the one word held such a world of scornful irony that Gaspar ground his teeth.

"Rafael!" he roared at her. "A man of brain and wit, who shall break and tame you, signorina."

"All in good time," Ginevra answered composedly. "Each day brings its own chance. Rafael has not wedded me yet."

"Go!" Gaspar commanded, pointing to the door. "I will not be defied. Were you a man, I would know how to deal with you."

"And Rafael would not," Ginevra retorted, as a parting thrust.

Gaspar gazed after her as she went—

he could find no answer to that last taunt.

"Would that father Adam had had the sense to keep his rib!" he soliloquized, "for that would have saved all the trouble there is."

THEN, remembering Vittorio and the scars of the wine flagon on his own face, he wondered, and from that went to thought of Ginevra's estimate of Vittorio. The girl was nearly a woman, and had a shrewd will of her own; the sooner she was married to Rafael, now, the better, lest the income from her estates should go out from Gaspar's own family. For years, now, Gaspar had absorbed that income; only by marrying her to Rafael, with whom he could compound when the time came, could he hope to retain even a portion of the good annual dole.

Then came Andrea the page, booted and cloaked and swaggering, very much of a man. This Andrea was Gaspar's sister's son, and was, too, the only human being for whom Gaspar ever showed the slightest affection, since his wife had deserted him by reason of his persistent cruelty.

"Perked as a pigeon in the mating season," said Gaspar, eyeing him none too favorably. "Keep sharp wits and open eyes, see that Rafael Montani knows his man, and then return. See, too, that one of you is ever awake—our quarry is a dangerous man, so keep guard and guard always, between here and Rafael's house in Savona. And see, too, that as far as may be della Porta gets no sight of you."

Andrea caressed his bruised throat, where Vittorio's fingers had clenched. "I will take care," he promised.

"And remember," Gaspar counselled, "that at any time you may need fresh

horses—do not override. There is an inn not far from where we took that child, where you should stay this night—six leagues is an ample journey. Now take your men and the letter, and go.”

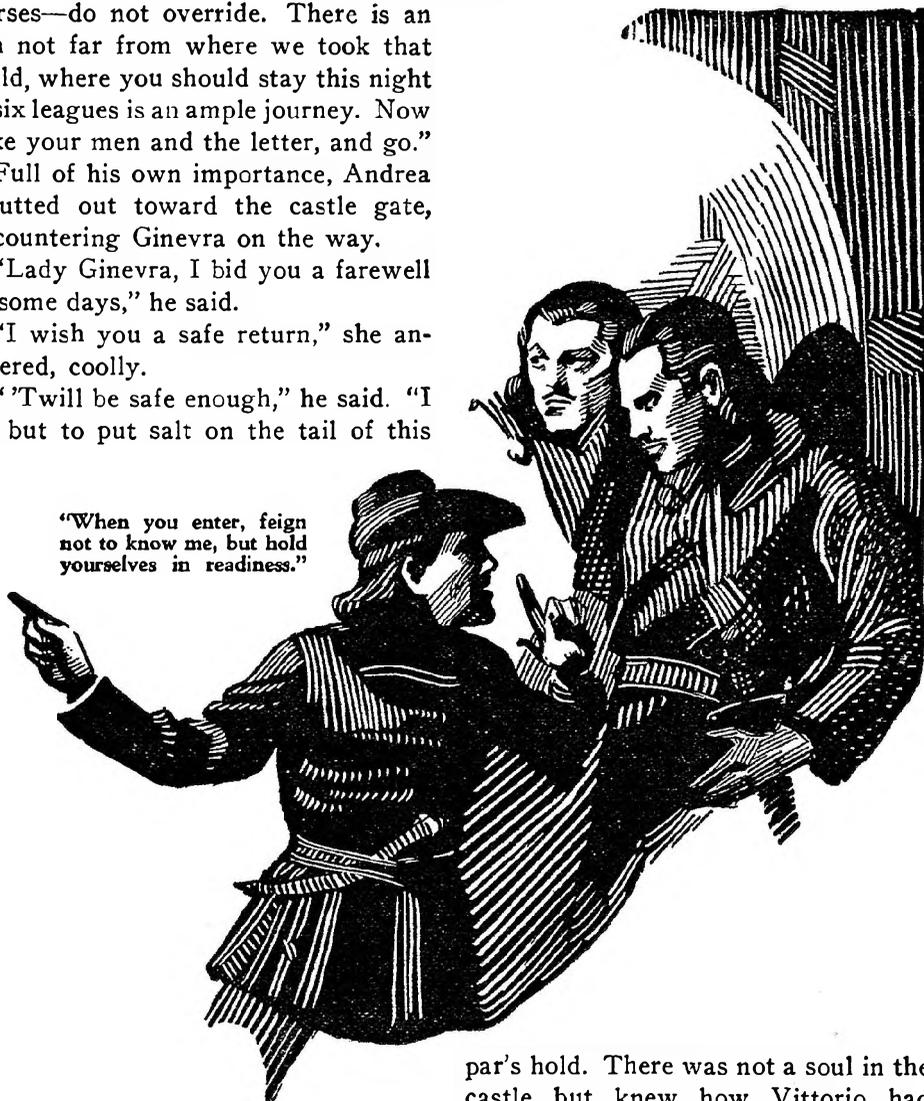
Full of his own importance, Andrea strutted out toward the castle gate, encountering Ginevra on the way.

“Lady Ginevra, I bid you a farewell of some days,” he said.

“I wish you a safe return,” she answered, coolly.

“’Twill be safe enough,” he said. “I go but to put salt on the tail of this

“When you enter, feign not to know me, but hold yourselves in readiness.”



della Porta, for our kinsman Rafael.”

He passed on, peacock-wise, preening himself as he took his three men down the rough track that led through Sercona to the plain, and meanwhile Ginevra went to her own chamber and looked out on the plateau toward which Gaspar’s castle faced. She saw Andrea ride out with his three men, but her thoughts went past them to that one who had rescued the child from Gas-

par’s hold. There was not a soul in the castle but knew how Vittorio had trapped and outwitted Gaspar, now, and Ginevra, remembering how he had bent from his saddle toward her at the castle gate, longed for a way to counter the evil that Gaspar sought against this young della Porta. For he had stirred her heart as had no other, and even against her guardian she would aid him, were it possible. She dreamed, as youth will always dream, while Andrea rode out.

BENEDETTO, Vittorio's bulky serving man, slept stretched on a settle at the inn called the House of the Seven Fishes, which was set a little way past where the track from Gaspar's castle above the hamlet of Sercona joined the road to Savona. For such a hostelry, a mere wayside halting place, the wine was good, and mayhap Benedetto had drunk a flagon too much. However that may have been, the trampling of horses outside the inn failed to rouse him, and not until Andrea, entering, stood by the settle, did Benedetto open his eyes to the dimness of gathering night, mistaking the figure that stood by him—

"My lord Vittorio—" he said, and then realized his error, for this cloaked figure was too slight and small for his master.

"Nay," said Andrea, "but a page of the house of Alderoni, on my way to Ferrara."

Benedetto yawned and composed himself in a corner of the settle. "The dusk deceived me," he said, and thenceforth ignored the page.

Andrea, stepping out, went to the stable where his three men attended to the horses.

"In the inn sits the serving man of Vittorio della Porta," he told them. "When you enter, feign not to know me, but hold yourselves in readiness, and await my word to set on him. Count Gaspar will be pleased to see him and learn tidings of his master, I doubt not."

His three villains grinned comprehension, and Andrea returned to the inn, ordering food, wine and a light. Presently in came the three of Gaspar's following, who showed up in the light as sturdy men, well armed and, by their clamor, both hungry and thirsty. Benedetto rubbed his eyes well open

and regarded them with more than curiosity, for the brawniest of the three incautiously displayed on his jerkin the device of an eagle grasping a skull in its claw, and Benedetto knew well that it was Count Gaspar's device. Waiting for his master's return from the adventure of the child's rescue, Benedetto had had time to learn the significance of that badge.

The three talked in low tones among themselves while they ate and drank, but Benedetto noted how one or other ever kept an eye on the page, who sat apart. Being an old campaigner, too, he noted what lay ready to his hand in case of an onset, and feigned to doze on the settle, though with every nerve alert. His last knowledge of his master was that Vittorio had gone to Count Gaspar's hold to rescue one Giulio, a peasant lad; he had no knowledge that Vittorio had completed the task in one day instead of the three which he had set himself, and thus he kept open ears lest these three should mention Vittorio's name.

But they gave no sign, save for the device on the doublet, of even belonging to Count Gaspar's following, and Benedetto seemed to doze until Andrea stood up, stretched himself—Benedetto saw that all three of the men came to postures of alertness—and cried—

"At him!"

THERE had lain beside Benedetto a heavy iron bar, fallen from its place where, above the open hearth, it had been used to hang spits and pots above the fire. The end of this, mightily thrown by Benedetto, split the skull of Andrea's brawniest man almost as the three moved, for it was hurled with such force as would have felled a horse. Then Benedetto's empty wine cup

struck Andrea full in the face and crumpled him to the floor, and the man who had seemed to drowse came, sword in hand, at the two who were left on their feet. The swiftness of Benedetto's attack was great as his strength, and he drove on the two so fiercely that one sat, and then lay, on the floor, coughing up blood, within the minute. Benedetto sent the other's dagger spinning with a twist of his sword blade—

"Surrender!" he bade, as the landlord gaped open-mouthed at the door, "or you too go unshriven."

The man held out his hands. "Truss him securely, landlord," Benedetto bade. "There is cord enough on that dead one."

The cowering host obeyed, and, ere this work was fully done, Benedetto darted at Andrea, who thought to crawl quietly toward the door, having wakened from the stunning blow of the flung cup. Blood streamed down his cheek from a cut that the vessel had given him, and, as Benedetto jerked him to his feet, he looked a far different being from that perky youth who had ridden away from Gaspar's hold.

"Fetch more cord, landlord, and bind this cockerel too," Benedetto bade. "Methinks this Count Gaspar is ill served."

Andrea's hand was in his doublet, but Benedetto plucked it forth. With a twist of his wrist Andrea threw on the coals in the hearth a packet, but Benedetto kicked it out on the floor before it could burn. When the host returned, Benedetto himself took the cord and bound Andrea securely. Then he took up the packet.

"Would that I had the gift of reading," he said, "for it is in my mind that this love-letter may also be a news-sheet."

He snapped the scorched cord and gazed at what Andrea had written at Gaspar's dictation.

"Legs of flies!" he said, contemptuously. "Here, landlord, I saw you make a reckoning—if you can write you can read, so call this matter over aloud to me."

Cringing to the winning side, after the manner of his kind, and without the wit to pervert the script, though he feared Count Gaspar, the man obeyed.

"So!" said Benedetto, when the tale had been told. "A brave story, in truth, and poison is to do the work that is beyond Gaspar's power." He went to the one man whom the brief onset had left alive, beside Andrea, and lifted the fellow by his ear, paying no heed to shrieks of pain until he had got the man on his feet.

"You have heard?" he roared, baring his teeth like a great wolf. "Where is my lord Vittorio?"

"None of us know," said the man, fearfully. "We have sought, at Count Gaspar's bidding, but without avail."

"Then you two stay bound in my charge till I keep tryst with my master tomorrow even," Benedetto said, composedly. "Host, clear away those two carrion heaps, and find me a room where I may keep guard till dawn—and—" as a sudden thought came to him—"lest you be in league with this Gaspar's army of cut-throats, you shall keep watch with me, and if any come to attempt a rescue you die first."

There were few tricks that Benedetto could not forestall, for the elder della Porta, when Vittorio set out for Savona, had chosen his wisest and trustiest servitor to guard his son's life. Here in Gaspar's land, he judged, innkeepers would league with Gaspar out of fear, and the sour look on this

one's face showed him that he had made no blunder in this.

He took back Gaspar's letter to Rafael, "for my lord Vittorio will welcome that script," he explained, and dragged his two prisoners to a room that the host found for him. There till dawn he sat with bared sword, while the landlord alternately slept and cursed beside him, and the blood dried black on Andrea's face.

THE fight at the inn was two days old when there came to Count Gaspar that one of the three men whom Benedetto had left alive, with his feet tied under his horse's belly, and he craved audience of his lord. Gaspar consented to hear him. As briefly as fearfully the man told how Benedetto had conquered and had taken both him and Andrea, securely bound, to a tryst with Vittorio della Porta.

"You craven swine!" Gaspar roared. "Ere I bid them hang you, where is Andrea?"

"Lord," said the man, "Andrea is in this Vittorio della Porta's keeping, and Vittorio bade me tell you that he rates the page at one thousand crowns, if you would purchase him."

Gaspar's oaths poisoned the sunset. Vittorio should hang, though it took the last man of his band to pull on the rope, and the monastery of San Paolo, where Vittorio had lodged himself, should be given over to fire and sword if it gave not up Vittorio and his Benedetto. Once before had he, Gaspar, dared the ban of the Church, and he would dare it again rather than let Vittorio escape. When he had stormed to silence—

"Lord Count," said the scared servant, "this Vittorio, whose man is not a man, but a devil, bade me tell you that

I and—and the Lady Ginevra alone—may go to bear the thousand crowns to San Paolo, and if any third is seen on the plain you get but Andrea's body."

Now Gaspar stilled from his raging, and they always said of him that in his still wrath he was most dangerous.

"Ginevra?" he asked, quietly. "And what surety gave he of her safe return with Andrea?"

"He said, Lord Count, 'the word of a della Porta, which has never been broken.' Failing the thousand crowns, he takes Andrea to Savona with the letter to Rafael Montani."

"For us to rescue on the way," Gaspar completed.

"At first sign of a rescue, the page dies," said his man.

"Get you untied from that horse," said Gaspar at last, "and bid them send the Lady Ginevra to me. We will hold to this devil's terms, for the day, but if he win through to Savona this castle of mine shall be given over to goats for stabling. He shall breathe out his life a breath at a time in my torture chamber, and at the end I will have molten crowns poured down his throat."

For never, through the twenty years and more that he had harried the countryside from his hold above Sercona, had any come up against him as had this Vittorio della Porta; never before had any attempted to thwart him, for the times were stark, and the land divided out among the lords of the hill castles. Each of them took, as he would, spoil from his own area of the plains. It were worth a thousand crowns to get Andrea back and have della Porta at his mercy, and he must accomplish the first before he could move to gain the second of these ends.

THUS, seemingly reluctant for the task, Ginevra set out three hours after dawn of the next day, with that one servitor for escort. On a fat white pony she rode down the hill track, through Sercona, and out to the plain where the hills end. Very fair and sweet she looked, as she came with her guide to the gate of San Paolo an hour after noon. Since no woman might enter that gate, unless she sought sanctuary, Vittorio came out to her, bare-headed and smiling.

"I could be glad of this affray, since

"That I might see you again—I could compass it in no other way."



it gives me sight of your face again, Lady Ginevra," he greeted her.

"Yet how do you count it, my lord, to use a woman as bearer of ransom?" she asked spiritedly. "Do you rank me as a servant?"

Vittorio flushed and bit his lip at the words. "In no way," he said. "I would have you hear from my own lips that the child, whom you bade me handle tenderly, is restored to his mother, and

would have you learn that this ransom paid by Gaspar, for his page Andrea, goes to the child's mother, Gaspar's payment for the murder of her husband by his men."

"This you tell me for Count Gaspar's ear?" she asked.

"As you will," he answered. "Had I my way, you should never see Gaspar's hold again, but another should shelter you."

Ginevra smiled. "Gaspar's power stands between," she suggested.

"No," Vittorio answered quickly, "but my own word, that if Gaspar ransomed his page both you and the page should return without let or scathe. But you will dismount awhile—my man is even now bringing refreshment."

She slipped down from the white pony. There was a stone seat by the monastery gate, to which Vittorio escorted her. Benedetto brought her a cushion, and wine and food for her and his master—also he took back with him that man of Gaspar's who had accompanied her, and who bore Andrea's ransom. The white pony and the horse, tied saddle to saddle, stood by the gate; lizards ran in and out of the cracks in the monastery wall in the sunlight, and the world seemed to sleep in warmth.

"You know why the page goes free?" Vittorio asked.

"For the sake of a thousand crowns," she answered, smiling.

He shook his head. "That I might see you again—I could compass it in no other way," he told her.

At that she was silent, with her eyes turned away from his.

"And," he went on slowly, "I would that I might ever see your face, for it is fairer than aught else on earth to me. There lies the way to Savona—is not the city safe as Gaspar's castle?"

Ginevra looked full at him. "My word to Gaspar, that I would return, bars that road," she answered.

"And if there were no bar?" he asked quickly.

She made a little gesture, as of one who would thrust from her a thing desired. "But a few days since, I was a child," she said, "but life drives. There in the castle I have met few men, save for Gaspar and his kinsman Rafael. I

cannot answer—I myself do not know."

Instinct bade him refrain from pressing her. "Has Gaspar held you always?" he asked. "I have questioned why such a one as you should live there since first I saw your eyes—will you not give me more than food for questioning?"

She told him how, in her babyhood, her father had left her in charge of Gaspar and his wife—Gaspar had been more of a man and less of a brute, in those days—and how, when the wife fled, she had been left to Gaspar's care. How, for the sake of her wealth, she was gently tended in that rough hold, wanting nothing, nor greatly desiring other forms of life, until . . . "until you came," she ended.

THERE followed a silence, in which Vittorio's hand sought and found hers, lifting it to his lips. Then he pointed along the road to Savona.

"Your word to Gaspar bars that road for me," he told her.

Understanding, she did not question, nor protest, but thrilled to realization of his promise and the strength that shaped it. Here was such a man as life had not shown her before.

For an hour they sat, conversing, and for the time content—youth will know the nature of their talk, which was of themselves and the future, unshadowed as youth always sees it. When the hour had passed, and Ginevra would go back, Vittorio pointed to where Gaspar's towers shadowed among the hills.

"He has ruled and ravaged too long," he said, "and he has held you far too long. Though it take a year or ten, I will smoke out that nest, making you reward of the enterprise."

"Careless of my will?" she asked, smiling.

Vittorio looked full into her eyes. "Tell me your will," he bade, "that I may keep the words for hope, till we meet again."

Her gaze dropped before his, and she hesitated, maiden-wise.

"Only—only my word takes me back to Gaspar," she whispered at last. "Not my desire."

In a little time Benedetto came out from the gate, leading Andrea by a cord that bound his hands. He lifted Andrea on to the horse that Ginevra's escort had ridden, and tied his feet under the horse's belly. A scar, but half healed, spoiled the page's cheek, and impotent rage was in his eyes as he looked at Vittorio.

"The man who came with me?" Ginevra asked.

"Goes not back," Vittorio answered. "My word was that you and this page should return—no other. If I sent the man back, Gaspar would but hang him for his and his fellows' defeat."

Knowing this for truth, she let it pass. Benedetto, having tied Andrea on the horse, loosed his hands that he might guide it.

"Is there no way by which we may communicate at need?" Vittorio asked Ginevra.

Quick-witted, she saw a way. "Before the castle is an open sward, across which passes the track to Sercona," she answered. "At the point where the track enters among the trees, one tree is lightning-withered, and there are hollows under its roots, as I learned by playing there when a child. There, in urgent need, I would contrive that a message should be placed—I can do no more."

"It is enough," he said, "for if the

message were from you, I would win it from Gaspar's guard house."

He led her to the white pony, and, lifting her in his arms, set her on the saddle. "I am loath to let you go," he whispered.

"As I am at going," she whispered back.

For an instant her hand lay on his uncovered head, and she gazed full into his eyes, bravely.

"If I come to Savona," she said aloud, that Andrea might hear.

"Then," said Vittorio, even more loudly, "we shall meet again, Lady Ginevra. I have been grateful for your presence, and for this boy's ransom. A safe return to Gaspar's hold."

He watched while with Andrea she set out on the track that led to Sercona and the hills.

"Would you know her again?" he asked Benedetto, who also watched.

"Surely," Benedetto answered, "but since we go to Savona there is no need that I should know her."

"We do not go to Savona yet," Vittorio said, in a musing way.

"It is ever so," Benedetto growled, "and such beauty aye breeds folly in men, if they be but young enough. Whither now, my lord?"

"To the hills and safety, till it is time to strike again," Vittorio answered.

At the hour of the Angelus, that evening, he knelt by a wayside shrine in the hills.

"Give me strength," he prayed, "and the wit that is more than strength, that I may see her face again."

CHAPTER III

BY THE fork of the devil's tail," said Count Gaspar, "he shall not win through to Savona!"

He sat with Andrea in the small inner chamber beyond the great hall of his castle. Andrea was almost past pagehood in age, but since he was the only human thing to whom Gaspar ever showed tenderness, he kept his place, finding the affectation of boyishness more suited to his cunning than would have been the frank statement of grown manhood.

"Yet that man of his, the giant Benedetto, said that they would set out at dawn tomorrow," Andrea stated.

"Set out—yes," Gaspar growled. "There is a long thought between setting out and coming in. If Vittorio della Porta do more than set out—hell's hobs!" he broke out, violently—"speak no more of him. That a perked jay like him should—"

There he stopped. Insult had been piled on insult, injury on injury, and Gaspar raged at the thought of this youngster who had thus singed his beard.

"Let me but once lay hands on him—" he said again, and again stopped without defining his intent.

"A band, out on the road," Andrea suggested.

The big Count grinned derision. "Time you gained more wit, Andrea," he gibed. "Here we sit in our castle above Sercona, and the country trembles at sight of the castle—we are lord, here—" it was Gaspar's way to affect the regal plural, at times—"and this della Porta well knows it. We rule and harry as we will. And you—you, Andrea—dream that he is so much fool as to take the road, after all he has done. He has declared war on me, and he and his men will steal toward Savona by devious ways, not by the road."

"Then if we set watch on the monastery—" Andrea replied.

"The monastery no longer holds him, by my reckoning," Gaspar retorted, shortly. "For look you, in your hearing he said they would set out for Savona tomorrow, that we might spy on their start tomorrow. That we may not see, they will leave the monastery today. And he said, too, that Savona was their goal, for which reason I bet a falcon to a sparrow that he has no intent to go to Savona yet awhile. I am no fledgling of a season, but a hawk of age, Andrea, and that you should be deceived by such talk proves you still childish."

"I tell you but what this della Porta said, not what he meant," Andrea protested. "I have my own beliefs."

"And they?" Gaspar asked.

"See now"—and Andrea checked points on his fingers—"he bade you send my ransom by Ginevra, and before that had speech with her when he rescued the child you had captured, here in the castle. She came to the monastery gate, and there passed some time before that big devil Benedetto brought me out to ride back here to the castle. What passed between those two? If you would know Vittorio's intent, ask Ginevra."

GASPAR, growling ragefully, shook his head. "Ask that spitfire—think to get truth out of her? Nay, but I leave the taming of her to Rafael, when he has married her."

"A thumbscrew would make her speak, easily," Andrea suggested.

"If she knew, mayhap, but it may not be," Gaspar said. "Look you, Andrea, Ginevra is of age, and the revenues of her estate go to make up the poor sums we can wring out for the upkeep of our castle—the lands about Sercona are poor, and there are few travelers to

rob, in these troubled times. If we kill Ginevra, we lose the revenue that is hers by rights, and if we treat her hardly, she may wake up to the knowledge that it is in her power to walk out from this our castle, leaving us much impoverished. No, but I plan to marry her to Rafael, with whom I will compound for a part of the revenue still to come to me, after she is safely in his hands. Ginevra must be treated softly, though we hang every other man and woman about the place."

"There are too many men about the place," Andrea grumbled.

"Soft and slow there," Gaspar admonished. "For at times comes a band of merchants through the passes, or some other body on whom we may fall to our own advantage. These ravines are rare holders of dead bodies, and a handful of crowns now and then—"

"But about this Vittorio," Andrea reminded him.

Gaspar sprang up, wrathful. "A plague on this Vittorio!" he roared. "My head is sore, and the marks of fingers are yet on your throat where he gripped you. I will roast him over a dungeon fire, yet, and hang him half-cooked!"

"Catch him, first," Andrea admonished.

Gaspar looked wrath at the only one in the castle who dared mock him—the only one, with the exception of Ginevra. "I have a mind to lay you across my knee, and make it an ill thing for you to sit down, Andrea," he said, quietly—and when Count Gaspar was most quiet, he was most dangerous. "Shall I look to a fool of a lad to teach me the way to catch this Vittorio?"

"I trust not, lord," said Andrea, meekly.

NOW, sitting up in the hills behind Gaspar's castle, Vittorio summoned his prisoner to him, and Benedetto saw that the summons was obeyed. No man trifled with Benedetto; he was too big and well muscled.

"Now say, you Pietro," Vittorio asked, "how many men has this reaving count at his command?"

"Some two hundred, lord," Pietro answered meekly.

"And you—are you willing to serve against him?"

"Lord, I serve him who pays," Pietro answered. "Back at the castle there, we fed well, but my pay is some three months overdue."

"Pay him the full sum, Benedetto," Vittorio bade, without hesitation. "And henceforth, Pietro, you are enlisted under my standard, until we pull down that castle about Count Gaspar's ears, having first brought out the lady Ginevra in safety."

"Here sit three of us, like sparrows on a bough," Benedetto interjected, "and we talk of pulling down a strong castle and putting to the sword two hundred men and their leader."

"Leonidas conquered a host, Benedetto," Vittorio remarked.

"It must have been before my time—I never heard of it," Benedetto responded. "Lord, I promised your father to see you safely to Savona, and now comes this madman adventure with a thieving brigand in a stronghold of these hills. Let be, and march on, I beg."

Vittorio shook his head. "I were craven if I thought of it. Between me and this Count Gaspar there is war that must be fought out."

"Now look you, lord, Leonidas or no Leonidas, you have half strangled

and bound the man in his own castle, and I have killed two of his men, brought away a third, and won out of him a ransom for his page. The honors of the war are with us—let us now sign a peace and go on to Savona, as was your intent.”

“While Ginevra Alderoni is in yonder castle, I besiege it,” Vittorio answered stubbornly.

Benedetto made a gesture which signified that such madness was beyond his understanding. “A great siege,” he grumbled. “I think I see Gaspar sending to Milan for reinforcements to withstand it.”

Vittorio looked down through the trees at the castle roof, where it sat back against sheer cliff on a shelf of the hills. It stood clear and grim in the evening light, a place of mighty strength, assailable only from the front, where a culverin stood on each side of the drawbridge, hooded and portentous. So far as strength was concerned, Benedetto was right; the castle was impregnable to an army, let alone to three men; on the face of it, Vittorio’s talk was no more than talk.

“A great siege,” he said. “The siege of brain against muscle, and whether it take a week or a year, the siege goes on.”

IT WAS high summer, and they three slept in the open with no thought of setting guard; bracken under pines shielded them, and when dawn came Vittorio sat up, hearing how Benedetto slept loudly, while the man Pietro was silent. Vittorio set his chin upon his hand and thought until Benedetto stirred, rolled over, and rubbed his eyes as he sat up.

“Breakfast, Benedetto,” Vittorio bade, silkily. “Thanks to the good

monks of San Paolo, we can eat without moving out hence. After, there is a thing or two to be done—I have no mind to let this siege of ours languish.”

Through a gap where they had broken down the bracken, they could see the castle frontage clear in the morning light. Presently the drawbridge fell slowly, and there rode out, by two and two, nearly all Gaspar’s company, turning up along the shelf on which the castle was set, crossing the torrent that raved on its way to the plain, and then going down toward the hamlet of Sercona. Vittorio rubbed his chin, where yesterday’s bristles made scratchiness.

“Why?” he asked.

“The hunt is up, lord,” Benedetto said. “Gaspar is raising the siege, methinks.”

Now, since he was a man whose loyalty was past question, Benedetto was allowed full freedom of speech with his master, but to Vittorio’s ear this went beyond mere freedom. He looked at Benedetto with as much of a scowl as his handsome face could compass.

“When this siege is won,” he said, “you shall go on your knees to me for that saying, and beg forgiveness.”

“That I will, gladly,” Benedetto answered, “*when* we have won.”

Still watching as they lay among the bracken, their horses concealed among the pines, they saw how there rode out from the castle a girl on a fat white pony—Ginevra’s pony—but the distance was too great for them to see her face. Behind her rode one man as attendant, and she set the pony at a winding path that took her up the hillside, away where the rise slanted from perpendicular and admitted of cutting a path. Halfway to the summit she paused and looked about her, as if searching, and waved a white kerchief,



Benedetto was right; the castle was impregnable to an army, let alone to three men.

as if to signal. Vittorio started up.

"I must answer that signal," he said.

"Lord," Benedetto pleaded hastily, "have a thought. It may be but a lure to draw you out."

"The lady Ginevra—a lure?" Vittorio questioned fiercely. "Nay, but do you have a thought, Benedetto, for I will flay the man who dares say that Ginevra Alderoni could play false. Saddle on the instant, and we will ride out. I go to speak with her."

Sulkily, against his will, Benedetto obeyed, and Pietro went with him to saddle the horses. It was youth's madness, Benedetto knew; he himself would never have trusted this girl's signal, but his master, being in love for the first time, was mad as are all in such case. Pietro gave no opinion, not being asked.

"If it be a trap—" Benedetto said, leading Vittorio's horse to him, "then I gave warning."

"Peace!" said Vittorio. "Stay here, while I go to her."

He rode out, and they stood by their saddled horses and watched.

The white pony went up and up, coming to the crest of the hills and to the level from which Benedetto watched; behind it the stout cob that carried the serving man followed, and the two vanished over a rise, two miles or more distant from where Benedetto and Pietro stood concealed among the pines. Round the crest of the hill, past the back of the castle at the top of the cliff that sheltered it, rode Vittorio, and on a sudden Benedetto gave a great cry and swung to his saddle, turning to Pietro when he was up.

"Mount, man—mount and ride! A snare, as I thought."

Pietro mounted too, and they rode

out, but far too late; encircling Vittorio, horsemen closed in from all sides; Gaspar led his men to drive in the lone rider toward the cliff, and Pietro cried out—

"Useless—we should but die with him. A hundred to one—the band is out in full, Benedetto."

Benedetto clapped in his spurs. "Then we die with him," he retorted, and reined in almost at once. "See here, you man that served Count Gaspar, you ride now to the rescue of the lord you serve with me, or I wring your neck before I go alone!"

"Lead on," Pietro answered meekly, and pulled out a long sword that swung from his saddle, in readiness.

THEY might have spared themselves the trouble of their ride. Gaspar and his men closed in on the lone rider, far too quickly for any aid to reach him. They could see him back to the precipice edge below which was the castle, while the fan-like formation of his attackers closed in. They saw him set spurs to his horse and charge on where Gaspar's great bulk made him conspicuous, and they saw, too, how Gaspar's men bunched to the help of their master. Then, where the bunching left a gap, Vittorio swerved, and would have won clear, but a crossbow bolt sang on until it found his horse, and the good beast went spinning. Vittorio, flung clear with sword in hand, lay still for such time as one might count a score, and then he got to his feet while Gaspar's men closed round him.

Because of their crowding, neither Benedetto nor Pietro could see that fight. Vittorio got his back against his dead horse, which had fallen by a tree, and circled until he got the bole of the



"Try a bout with me, Gaspar," Vittorio mocked. "These are but flies you send . . . Do you fear to climb down from your saddle and fight?"

tree behind him. There, bared sword ready, he faced his assailants, and Gaspar sent them at him by twos.

The first two went in gaily enough, but the whickering blade found them before they had fairly engaged this swordsman. Two others came, for it was Gaspar's intent to take this Vittorio alive, but one limped away and sank down to bleed to death, and the other fell flat before the swordsman, who laughed up at Gaspar as he sat his horse, raging. The next two hesitated.

"Try a bout with me, Gaspar," Vittorio mocked. "These are but flies you send, troublesome, but harmless. Do you fear to climb down from your saddle and fight?"

"Back, all!" Gaspar roared in answer. "A crossbow bolt or two will settle him—back, and give room for the shafts to fly!"

But, as they backed, Vittorio sprang like a tiger, straight at Gaspar's horse. He struck it across the muzzle with the

flat of his sword, and it went up and up till it seemed that Gaspar must come down pinned to earth. While the horse balanced in air, Vittorio's sword went

in between its ribs, a clean, straight thrust, and Gaspar came down with a crash to lie senseless.

But for that venture Vittorio had exposed his back—it was only a trick to save himself from the crossbow bolts, and he knew, must have known, that ultimately numbers would defeat him. A dozen came at him from all sides, crowding each other; he moved like a doubling hare, and one and another went down, another and another, clean thrusts all. They stood back, those who were left, as from a devil, and somebody garbed like a woman landed on Vittorio's back with a flying leap—a score rushed to aid him, and the lone fighter went down under a heap of struggling men.

His sword was wrenched away, but with bare hands he fought them till Andrea, who had ridden the fat pony in woman's garb, feared lest he might yet escape. Stunned by a blow that Benedetto might have dealt, so fierce it was, Andrea reeled back out of the heap, and lay beside his unconscious master while the men-at-arms slowly bore Vittorio down. In the end they brought stirrup leathers, belts, reins and the like, and bound him past further fighting.

But Gaspar lay where he had fallen.

Andrea, recovering from the stunning blow Vittorio had dealt him, with one eye rapidly closing, got up and came at the bound man with a rush, to be stopped by one of the men-at-arms, who thrust out a weighty arm against which Andrea bore in vain.

"No, boy," said the man, grimly, "he fought a great fight, and is for no cockerel in hen's feathers to batter. Give a good fighter his due, and await the Count's word."

At that Andrea turned to where his master lay by the slain horse, breath-

ing stertorously. He bent over the unconscious form.

"We must bear him back to the castle," he said. "That fall has more than stunned him. Take him and the prisoner in."

It was an affectation of authority at which the men who heard grinned; already they had set to work to form stretchers for the dead of the fight, and a body of them made a rough rope litter for their master, to bear him back to his own place. Others took charge of Vittorio, and Andrea shed his woman's clothing and got back on the white pony, to ride in.

Hidden again, Benedetto watched, gnawing his lip.

"What now?" Pietro asked.

Benedetto shook his head. "Let me think," he said. "If *he* had but thought, this had not been. Where now is his siege?"

DOWN a stair so narrow that both its walls brushed him as he was carried they took Vittorio, to a large, bare chamber apparently hewn from the rock on which the castle was built. It was damp and cold and deadly silent, save for the faint sound of trickling water; there they left him in his bonds and took away their torches, so that darkness so thick as to seem palpable closed in on him.

When the last echo of steps had died beyond the closed door of this place, he lay and wondered how long it would be before Gaspar, whom he had seen carried senseless over the drawbridge, would waken to take vengeance. He was badly bruised, and had suffered certain small flesh wounds in the swift encounter, but of these minor things he took no heed. In all likelihood, such pains as he had to endure now were

mere pleasure compared with what Gaspar would inflict, before ending torture with plain killing.

He was still thinking of this when steps and a light came down the stair. As the bearer of the light opened the door and entered, Vittorio recognized that one who had held back Andrea from attacking him while he lay bound. The man set down good meat and a flask that undoubtedly contained wine, together with other things that made up a good meal. Then he stuck his torch in a hole in the wall and looked at the prisoner.

"Food fit for a guest rather than a captive," Vittorio remarked. "Why the kindness?"

"It is at the bidding of Andrea, Count Gaspar's page," the man answered. "The Count has not yet wakened."

"'Tis a wonderful kindness on Andrea's part," Vittorio commented.

The man shook his head. "Andrea said—the better fed you are, the more strength will be yours, so you will endure torture longer and more horribly, when the Count comes to enjoy your agonies."

"A clever youth," said Vittorio, composedly. "But how can a man eat without a free hand, and so bound that he can only lie on his back?"

"Sound judgment," said the man. "Now I set you one hand free, and stay here with you while you eat and drink all you will."

"Which is poisoned, the wine or the food?" Vittorio inquired.

The man shook his head. "Neither Count Gaspar nor his page would forego the sport of torturing you," he answered. "Eat and drink all you will, and fear nothing from what I have brought you."

He stooped and loosened the bonds

on Vittorio's right hand and forearm and, sitting up, Vittorio found that he could make shift to get at the meal. The man sat down on the floor.

"I do love a good fighter," he remarked. "But why—why fight the wolf of Sercona, lord? Were you tired of living?"

He was, apparently, a born gossip; Vittorio was quite willing to draw him out, being of the sort that leaves off hoping when it ceases to breathe—the torture had not begun, yet.

"Never so glad to be alive," he answered. "I fight Count Gaspar—well, because I fight Count Gaspar. Reckon it a habit."

The man grinned. "A habit that few acquire," he remarked. "A costly, trouble-bringing habit. As now you know."

"It may be," Vittorio answered, and took a mouthful which stopped him from further answer for the time.

"Faith," said the man, "Andrea's plan seems working, and the thought of what the Count will do with you weighs lightly on your mind."

"Let tomorrow care for tomorrow's troubles. Gaspar may be dead ere nightfall, and Andrea with him. And then your three months' back pay becomes a bad debt."

THE man stared. "Lord, what do you know of back pay?" he asked.

"Ah!" and Vittorio smiled. "I know many things. Such as the great treasure buried within a league of this place—I was on my way to dig it up, when I turned aside to fight and make end of this Count Gaspar—my men will make end of him, and it may be will tear down this castle in time to rescue me. The cannon are less than a day distant, and against them walls like these are of little value."

Cannon were in their infancy—the use of powder in them had begun but a few years before—and to a man like this the threat of them was vast through its intangibility. The man stared more than ever.

“Look you,” said Vittorio, eating steadily, “if you should think of a service where good pay comes promptly, rather than adherence to a master who has but days more to live—well, I know where it might be found. I have a kindness toward you, for saving me from the cowardly attack of Gaspar’s boy spy, and though I may not win free, yet it is no reason why you should not benefit by your consideration.”

The man laughed, ironically. “I have heard prisoners make offers before,” he said. “I was not born yesterday.”

“As you will,” said Vittorio, carelessly. “Meanwhile I eat, and the food is good. I drink, and the wine is more than good—I would that I could get a message to our general, bidding him spare Gaspar’s cellars when he attacks. In all likelihood it will be wasted down unappreciative throats, after the castle’s downfall.”

He spoke so certainly, with such utter absence of fear, that the man scratched his head in a puzzled way.

“Now,” said Vittorio, “since the goblet is empty, tie me up again a trifle more gently, though securely as you like. If I live long enough for our men to reach this place, I will commend you to our general for your thought, and if not—well, you may commend yourself.”

In a slow, puzzled way, the man tied him again, yet not so absently as to boggle the business. It was a thoroughly helpless man who looked up as he lay, while his jailer took the torch out from the hole in the wall.

“I would ask your name before you go,” Vittorio said, “just in case I may yet be of service to you.”

“Paolo, crossbowman,” said the other, shortly. “But, as I tell you, I have heard prisoners talk before.”

Vittorio yawned. “Ah, well, I may yet do more than talk, unless this hog Gaspar wakens from his hurts too soon. That is as fate may send. If you will take that light away, I will sleep awhile now.”

Paolo went out from the dungeon chamber slowly, wonderingly. It was not the first prisoner he had fed in that chamber, from which none in his memory had ever come out, save to death, but it was the first he had seen taking captivity so lightly, almost as a jest. He was a little puzzled, a little scared; if there were any truth in what the prisoner had said about an impending attack on the castle, with cannon to second the strength of a small army, then it behooved him, Paolo, to make some prudent provision against the event. Of course, it might be but a trick on the part of this della Porta, but on the other hand there might be a foundation of fact behind Vittorio’s talk.

He thought it over, simple soul that he was, as he went up the steps; he even went up the great central tower to its summit and looked out toward Sercona, to see if the army were yet in sight. Of course, it might come from the west, from the direction of Savona, and in that case the people of the castle would see nothing of its approach until the vanguard was at the top of the cliff. Paolo, crossbowman, went down again, having seen nothing, and in the great hall of the castle found Andrea, nursing his new bruise and very sorry for himself.

"Did he eat and drink well?" Andrea inquired, anxiously.

"Like a man at a banquet, Signor Andrea," Paolo responded. "And he told me—"

"What?" Andrea inquired, still more anxiously.

Paolo repeated the story of an army with cannon that Vittorio had told him. Andrea nursed his very black eye tenderly, while he reflected.

"We shall lose nothing by putting a man on watch at the top of the cliff," he said. "Tell them at the guard house that it is my order, since our master is past giving it."

IT WAS a little thing, a simple precaution such as any man in charge of a garrison would think to do, but to the mind of the man-at-arms it was confirmation of Vittorio's story. And, since Gaspar held his men to him by fear and wages, and by no other bond, Paolo began to cast about in his mind now to see how he could turn this knowledge of his to advantage. An army with cannon to make end of Gaspar and his thieves' hold was long overdue; it was on the way at last, Paolo told himself and, like all his kind, he set his wits to the problem of how to be on the winning side when the fighting should begin.

The simplest way, of course, would be by the help of the prisoner in the dungeon, who could tell him how to save himself. It would mean leaving three months' back pay—for he would not be able to stay here—but his skin was of more value to him than the problematic wage. And there was no time to be lost—

At about the hour of sunset, when Gaspar came out of his long insensibility and sat up, looking about him

dazedly, Paolo took down Vittorio's next meal, fully as well served as the first had been. On the hard stone floor Vittorio apparently slept, even snored a little, but rolled over quite naturally as the light showed about him. Paolo was impressed; if the prisoner could sleep thus, then the army with cannon must be very near, the crossbowman argued.

"Has the attack begun yet, good Paolo?" Vittorio asked, calmly.

Paolo shook his head, and Vittorio made a little sound expressing disappointment. "Then I must wear bonds a few hours yet," he said. "If that master of yours means to try me with torture of any kind, he must hurry. He will be over busied on other matters, soon."

Paolo untied one forearm, as before. "Lord," he said, "concerning those other matters, I would have a word with you on my own behalf."

"Say on," Vittorio bade, pleasantly. He had hardly dared to hope that his simple stratagem would succeed so well.

ANDREA the page bared his head as he stood in the great gateway that led to the courtyard of the castle. Paolo, crossbowman, led a sorrowful little procession, in the midst of which was carried a rude coffin. The burying-place for the castle lay beyond its walls, out among the trees that fringed the ravine in front.

"Who passes, Paolo?" Andrea asked.

"That one of us whom Vittorio, now prisoner in the dungeons, wounded in the shoulder," Paolo answered. "For all we could do for him, he bled to death. Swartbrow, they called him."

Andrea stood back. "Another count against Vittorio, when our master

comes to deal with him," he said, with vindictive joy.

"Aye, Signor Andrea, another count," Paolo agreed.

The mournful little procession moved slowly on. It was not through any reverence that they moved slowly, but because the coffin was heavy; there was little reverence for the dead who were carried out from Gaspar's hold.

They crossed toward the burying ground to put their burden down while they dug the grave. Two or three of the men-at-arms who had loitered about the guardhouse at the drawbridge followed, to see the last of Swartbrow, as they called him. Paolo was uneasy at their presence.

"It is well," he said, calmly. "Since you come to help, you may dig the grave. It is not yet done."

At that all save one, a mean-faced pikeman, turned back, having no wish to undertake work of that order. The pikeman followed on; Swartbrow had been a friend of his, and he had enough spirit of comradeship to see the last of his fellow adventurer.

Paolo walked beside him, stolidly, till they had passed from view of the castle among the trees; then on a sudden the pikeman found himself on the ground, and Paolo sitting on his chest with both hands gripping at his throat. One of the party came to Paolo's aid, and before the astounded pikeman knew the reason of this outrageous assault he was bound and gagged. His eyes bulged as the lid of the coffin was prized up with the edge of a spade, and a live man rose up and stood beside his recent prison.

"We must hasten away, Paolo," said Vittorio della Porta. "So far there is no sign of the army, and we are but twelve all told, I understand. But this

—this—?" he pointed at the bound man.

"An intermeddler, lord," said Paolo, "one who would come to the funeral, though we had no desire for his company. Now a dagger thrust between the shoulder blades as he lies—"

"No," Vittorio interrupted. "It is already nightfall, and we must hasten away to a place that I know of, to await reinforcements from my own people. Let us bear him with us—cut the bonds about his legs, that he may walk. We may send him back as messenger."

An orderly little band went out into the dusk, away from the castle; by moonrise they had climbed to the place under the pines where Vittorio had left Benedetto and the man Pietro with their horses when he set out on the ride that had ended in capture. They went in among the trees, fearlessly, and in the shadows Vittorio gathered them round him, bidding them listen.

"Soldiers all," he said, and his voice rang like that of one used to the ways of camps, "your man Paolo, crossbowman, has told you something of this matter, else you had not been here. First, let me ask if there is any one among you whose will it is to go back to the castle of Count Gaspar?"

Out of a silence came a mumbling answer. "If any of us wanted to be hanged, he might go back," said the voice among the shadows.

"That I guessed," said Vittorio, "but I would have you realize it before I speak on. On the word of Paolo, who told you of the army that would soon advance to the attack of the castle, you have come out to take service under me, it being understood that there is three months' pay due to each man at the outset, and that you follow my lead."



"The twelve of you are not enough to see me back in bonds," he said.

"It is understood," said Paolo, a little impatiently—he had sounded his men carefully for this adventure, and made sure of them before exchanging Swartbrow's corpse with Vittorio living, in the dungeon. This address seemed a waste of time.

"It is understood," said Vittorio complacently. "Let it be also understood that we who stand here are the army, for there is no other. We, in time, shall batter down Gaspar's castle."

There went up a series of exclamations of dismay, and Paolo broke out into a multitude of great oaths.

"Name of a dog!" he wound up. "Were ever men so cozened? Why should we not bind the liar and take him back to our master?"

BESIDE Vittorio a gigantic figure loomed in the gloom. "Why not?" asked Benedetto's voice. "Any of you who have a liking for split skulls might try their chance. I warrant that my lord Vittorio and I can give them all they desire. He has wit to escape from Gaspar's hold and drag a dozen



stout fools after him, and I have strength to batter out the brains of the dozen as they come at me. Why not?"

They murmured among themselves while Vittorio found and gripped his man's hand in the darkness, and then with a little laugh Vittorio spoke again to them.

"The twelve of you are not enough to see me back in bonds," he said, "and not a man of you dares face Gaspar without me, for the sake of his own skin. Say now, what shall it be? A free life, with full pay and good hunting till we have pulled down that hold of Gaspar's, or a fight between us, and the remnants from the fight to creep away to hide from Gaspar's wrath? I know the count and his ways, know how you men have held to him because you dare not forsake him, but here is the chance of making men of yourselves again, under me."

"And who on earth or under it are you, if there is no army to come up against Count Gaspar?" Paolo growled.

"Vittorio della Porta, gentleman of Milan," Vittorio answered. "I have broken a journey to Savona to have it out with this thieving Count who murders men by the wayside and steals children to make thieves of when they grow up. If you would know more, ask the Count—he has reason to know me, after but two interviews."

The dozen consulted in the shadows under the pines, until Benedetto yawned very audibly.

"Lord Vittorio," he said, wearily, "let us brain these hogs to stop their arguing, that I may get a little sleep."

"Nay" said Paolo, "but bid that evil-tempered henchman of yours hold his tongue and his hand, lord, for we are agreed. It is as you say—we cannot go back. For by this time they will

have found the corpse of Swartbrow where I left it in place of you in the dungeon, and sight of us would bring a rain of crossbow bolts. We are marked and masterless men—you have us trapped between following you and no leader at all, and there is no choice but to follow you."

"It is well," said Vittorio. "But that one you brought bound—what of him?"

"Let me stay, lord," he begged loudly, "for I know Count Gaspar, and my greeting would be a rope if I went back."

"There are thus sixteen of us," Vittorio remarked, calmly. "In the morning Benedetto here shall give to each of you two months' pay of what the Count owes you, as earnest that we will deal by you honestly. A matter of three days ago I had but one serving man, and now I have a stout band of sixteen to set against the Count's horde. Moreover, we know our ground for attack, and in a week the sixteen will be a hundred, when we may begin siege in earnest. Is any man among you for refusing this service?"

SILENCE followed on the query for nearly a minute, and then Paolo, as most responsible of the party, spoke.

"Lord Vittorio," he said, "we are masterless men, but for you, who have trapped us away from Gaspar to win your own life and freedom. Any one of us, alone, would be hunted down by the people of the countryside, who would welcome revenge on any of Gaspar's band—we are marked men all. If under you we can win back our good names, then we should be fools to refuse the chance. What say you, fellows?"

"Aye!" they growled in chorus. "Paolo is right."

"Then so it shall be," Vittorio said. "Now, since I have little experience of your loyalty, stack your arms, one and all, and Benedetto here will take charge of them while you sleep, lest we find daggers in our throats when morning comes. If such an order irks you, remember that I know you only as men of Gaspar's band, and must protect myself till we are better acquainted with each other."

"To leave ourselves defenceless in your hands?" Paolo asked in dismay.

"Just so," Vittorio assured him. "If you cannot trust me thus far, then I will seek other followers, and at the sacking of the castle there will be no share of the spoil for you dozen."

"A fair offer—" it was the pikeman, who had a squeaky voice, speaking his opinion. "Let us stack our arms, as he bids."

"Since you brought no arms—" Paolo remarked, and there was a general laugh at the man.

Vittorio took advantage of it. "When you have proved worthy of trust, I will make no such condition," he said. "'Tis but for the night, until I know you have no intent to go back to my enemy."

In the moonlight Paolo unslung the pouch which held his stock of bolts, and laid down his crossbow. "We may as well be hanged without arms as with them," he said.

"That is wise," Benedetto remarked, "for I should have grieved over splitting the skulls of such useful lumps of muscle as you dozen. I will search each one of you to make certain of no concealed daggers."

When they had eaten—for Paolo had foreseen the need for bringing food with them—they slept easily in the scented bracken. But Vittorio della

Porta sat beside Benedetto, wide awake, thinking of Ginevra as he had last seen her. For her sake he had declared war on Count Gaspar, and he would carry the war to its end.

CHAPTER IV

COUNT GASPAR, golden-bearded, giant of frame and mild of eye, was quiet, desperately quiet: and at such times he would as soon hang a man of his band of cut-throats as look at him. He summoned before him his chief lieutenant, Cesar the Black, and Andrea, his page, and put matters before them reasonably, and because he was so reasonable Cesar was afraid of him. For Cesar the Black knew his master's ways.

"Now look you both, and listen well while I set forth the case," said Gaspar.

"I am all ears, lord," said Cesar the Black.

"Like any mule," Gaspar retorted sweetly. "While I lie helpless, this Vittorio suborns a man of mine, who brings a corpse into his dungeon, and puts him in the coffin in its place. A dozen of my best men take out the coffin for burial, and where are they now? Andrea, if I were not kind of heart I would flay you for this, and you, Cesar, I would roast over logs in the great hall. But I am a kind master."

To that Cesar had nothing to say, and Andrea knew better than to say anything at all, from start to finish.

"Thus," went on the Count, "we have three defeats—I own it frankly. Three times this devil from Milan, who said he was on a peaceful journey to Savona, has tricked and bedeviled us, and still he is out in these hills, because

of Ginevra, our ward, who shall be wed safely to Rafael Montani, our kinsman in Savona, before many more weeks have passed. Andrea, get you gone to Savona at dawn tomorrow, and bid Rafael come here to me with a priest and a good following in case of need for fighting on the way, while Cesar and I set another trap for this young pest that haunts us."

Andrea, having set out once, only to be held to ransom by Vittorio, was about to protest, when there came a knock at the door of the chamber—the same small chamber, leading off from the great hall of the castle, in which Vittorio had stunned the Count with a flask of his own wine.

"Enter," said Gaspar, and there came to him the crossbowman who was set in charge of the guardhouse by the draw-bridge.

"What now?" Gaspar growled.

"Lord," said the man, "there were four butts of wine, sent up to us as is the custom, part rental for the lady Ginevra's lands—"

"I know," said Gaspar. "If that wine be not as it should, then let the sender look to himself."

"But, lord, there is no wine," said the man, in a frightened way.

Gaspar looked at him questioningly. "I have a thirst, not only for good wine, but for news of it," he remarked.

"The bringers of the wine were set upon by a band of some twenty men, about a mile distant from the gate, lord," the man explained. "These thieves knocked in the ends of three butts, and bade the bringers fetch in the casks in case you were in need of firewood. They sent a message saying that the other butt would be well cared for, since Vittorio della Porta and his men have thirsts—"

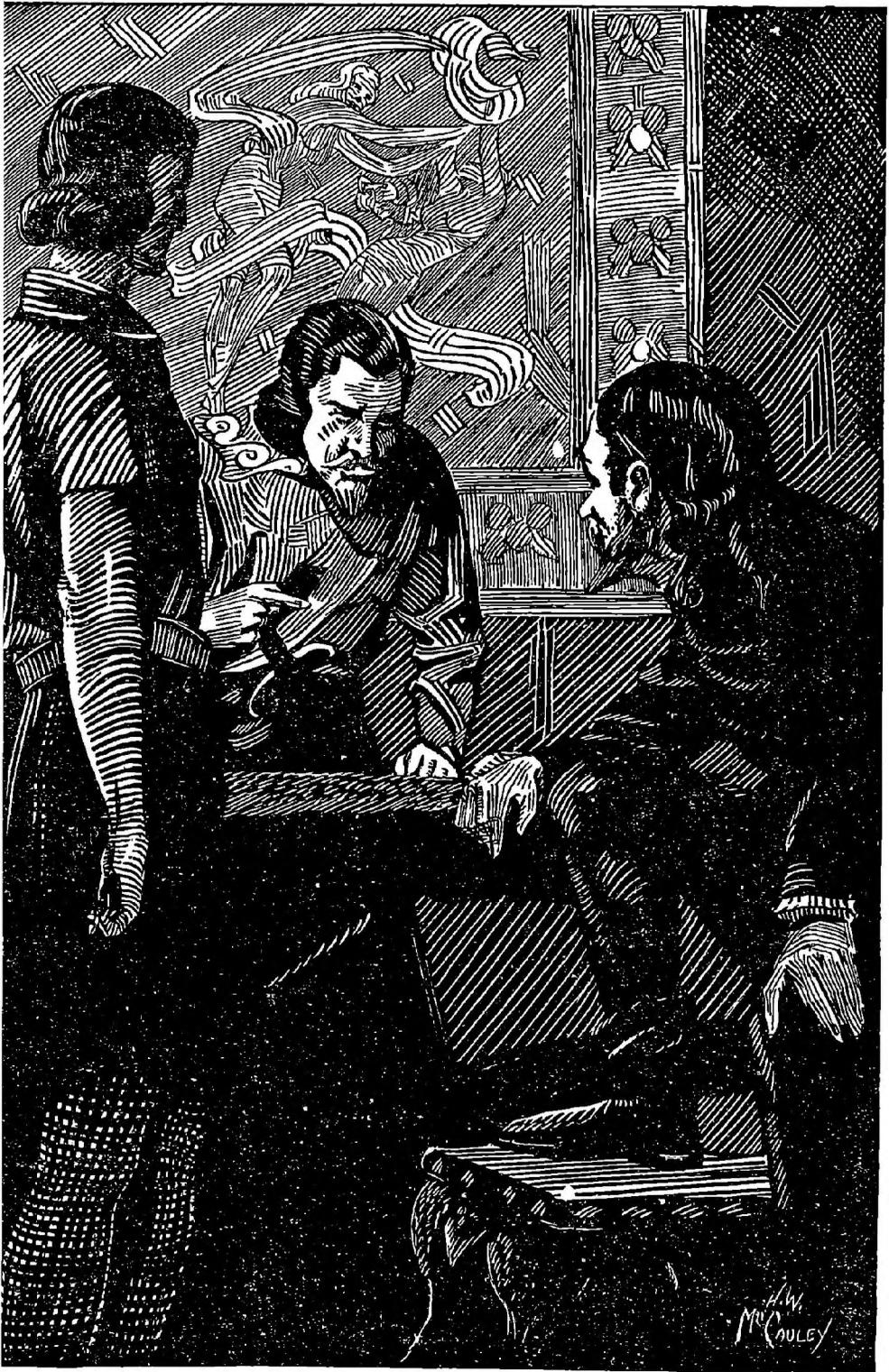
But here Gaspar, raving, got upon his feet and bellowed, quiet no longer, while the crossbowman fled back to his place and Cesar the Black turned pale. Andrea got near the door to listen. They heard all the lineage of Vittorio, which began with the devil and ranged through the animal world, according to Gaspar. They heard of hangings, flayings, burnings and of scattering ashes to the winds. They heard Gaspar roar himself through rage to hoarseness, and thence to quiet again, but they were no happier because of the quiet, for in his rages he was harmless.

"Stay you here, Andrea," he bade, "for the road to Savona is closed, for the time. We will swing this Vittorio della Porta by the heels from the top of the keep, and then you shall fetch Rafael. I rule this countryside, and my first task is the slaughter of these thieves and their leader."

Since he had harried and thieved and raped as he would for years, until this Vittorio came upon a journey, there was something comic in his calling others thieves, but he did not see it. If his hearers saw it, they kept their comments to themselves.

"Now," said Gaspar, quietly, "let us make a plan."

OUT in the hills Vittorio lay with his men, those men whom he had tempted from Gaspar's service to his own, and since the time was high summer they found good shelter in the bracken under the pines, and no man of them went short of food. Vittorio had determined that he would war against the Count until he had won Ginevra from the castle, and now he had a body of sixteen, all the more sure to fight Gaspar's men to a finish since they had revolted from his service. For there is



"Now," said Gaspar quietly, "let us make a plan."

no fighter against a color so fierce as he who has once worn it.

The elements of the task Vittorio had set himself were simple—far more simple than easy. Here he lay in the open with his little band, and down toward the ragged hamlet of Sercona sat the strong castle which held Gaspar and his reaving followers. Long before Gaspar's time the castle had been pronounced impregnable; his two culverins were forerunners of a state of affairs that would soon render such a position as that of the castle far from safe, but so long as arrows formed the chief missile weapons, and catapults and battering rams the instruments of siege, impregnable it was. Thus, in spite of his wrath, the big Count regarded Vittorio more as a buzzing wasp than as a definite threat against his safety; the buzzing angered him, all the more since he had lost the best part of a score good men, but he had little fear of any real evil to come—

He had sat up over Sercona for so many years in safety, taking toll as and when he would, that it was impossible to realize a threat of change from his long security.

The loss of his wine was still matter for wrath in his mind when Vittorio, who always kept a scout on the way between Sercona and the castle, captured two dozen sheep which came up for Gaspar's use. He kept the three herders by him while one of the sheep was slaughtered, skinned and dressed, for the meat was welcome, and then he sent the herders on with the skin and a message to Gaspar. The message was to the effect that though summer reigned now, winter would come in time, and Gaspar possibly feeling the cold, might wrap himself in the sheepskin. Gaspar foamed at the mouth

then, and the herdsman fled over the drawbridge and away before they could catch and hang him, as Gaspar bade them do.

Vittorio's man Benedetto, brawny as he was loyal, had scoffed somewhat when his master spoke of declaring war on Gaspar, but now he scoffed no more. For he had thought that Vittorio had in mind to make assault on the castle, but now he began to understand that there might be other ways of conducting a war; hitherto Gaspar's strength had lain in his terrorizing the countryside, a thing possible in those troubled times, when the cities were independent governments and the plains were at any freebooter's mercy. Now there came up a man who refused to be terrorized, but set to work to sap Gaspar's strength by striking at the stomachs of the castle garrison.

And when Gaspar had done foaming at the mouth, he began to understand that here was no mere buzzing wasp, but something to fear. He had in his band some eight score men, with a sprinkling of women and even some children, and the loss of even two dozen sheep was a serious matter. The wine could be made good—his men might drink water till they won more—but if food supplies should be threatened—

He summoned up Cesar the Black, and they made another plan, more suited to the urgency of the matter.

A SELDOM-TRODDEN track led down from the hills, passing before Gaspar's hold at a distance of less than a mile, toward Sercona hamlet and the plains. A mile or so nearer to the hill crests than was the castle, Vittorio and his little band lay out in the bracken under the pines, with mutton and wine

in plenty to make their camp content—though Vittorio knew well that it would not do to remain in idleness for long, lest his men come to fret at mere inaction. Over the capture of the wine butts and the sheep they rejoiced in their leader, and this was the spirit he wished to maintain in them.

Benedetto, out on the track, brought in a lengthy knave clad in tattered leather, with a leather-lined steel cap on his cropped head and a long case, also of leather, slung across his shoulders. As he came with Benedetto to the little ledge where Vittorio rested apart from his men, he warbled, and the noise was like blue-jays in a fight with crows.

Hid in the bracken, Vittorio's men looked and listened and grinned. "A well-set ruffian this, lord, if he were but clothed and armed," said Benedetto. "He speaks our tongue but evilly, and calls himself Jacobo, or some such name. When his throat is larded, to stop that creaking noise, he may talk more plainly."

"My name," said the newcomer, in very rusty Italian, "is Jack o' the Bow. I have come with this man at his bidding, but he seems deaf."

"Whence, and where?" Vittorio asked.

"For a hill thief," said Jack o' the Bow, "you are a most pretty looking scoundrel. As for me, I come from where I choose, and where I go is my own business. There may be a barrel of sour wine down there"—he indicated Sercona hamlet with a jerk of his thumb—"and by chance the drumstick of a crow to flavor the wine."

"Join my men, and find both wine and drumstick, and good pay for stout service," Vittorio offered. He judged instantly and rightly that here was one

of the wandering soldiers of fortune whom the times thrust out to serve where they could get food and pay.

Jack o' the Bow regarded him doubtfully. "The three of us might conquer five," he said, "but I like a larger band. There is more chance of pay and less of a hanging."

"We number near on a score, and shall number more yet, for the accomplishment of one special end," Vittorio said.

"So be the end is fairly easy, and the pay good, count Jack o' the Bow in the band. I find these hills a hungry haunt. What quest, master?"

Turning, Vittorio pointed down to where Gaspar's towers gloomed under the cliff. "To smoke out that nest, if it take a week or a year."

Jack o' the Bow gazed thoughtfully. "Stranger things have happened, in dreams," he remarked, "but this is a hard world; however, so long as there come pay, and wine, and the drumstick to gnaw, the master who provides all these may be as big a fool as pleases him. Lord, if that be your title, I am a man of few words. Let us eat and drink before we take that castle by assault."

AT A SIGN from Vittorio, Benedetto took Jack o' the Bow, whom they named Jacobo thenceforth, down among the followers who had already gathered to this quest. There Paolo, crossbowman, bent to inspect the long case that Jacobo laid down, but Jacobo whipped out an evil-looking knife and growled at him.

"Put it away, comrade," Paolo begged hastily. "I meant no harm, but I have heard much of these toys, fore-runners of our arbalest."

"May your arbalests burn!" Jacobo growled, "and ho! for the good yew

bow! Hands off it, goat face."

Paolo looked his wrath at the epithet, but Benedetto interposed diplomatically. "Show us how the toy works, Jacobo," he asked courteously. "We must find you arms if it is no good."

Jacobo laid aside a mutton bone that he had gnawed clean with great rapidity. "No good?" he echoed wrathfully. "You bull-necked wine butt — no good?" He drew out from the case a great bow of yew, strung it, and looked around. "Show me a mark at a mile, and see if your petty crossbows can match the tools of Crecy field."

His raucous challenge brought all the band around him, and while he gazed about to find a mark, Vittorio's voice came to them—

"Stand to, all!"

They gathered their arms and looked toward the castle. Out rode a little troop of horse to the open beyond the drawbridge, and divided into three groups. A long column of men on foot followed, and these, too, divided themselves into three parties, each attaching itself to one of the bodies of mounted men. They halted, as if expectant of orders before setting out.

"Paolo!" Vittorio called sharply, and Paolo ran up at once.

"Count these bands, as nearly as the distance will allow, and tell me how many remain in the castle."

Computation was fairly easy, for the clear air diminished distance; Paolo made his count. "Some twenty, or less, apart from women and children, lord," he answered.

Meanwhile Jacobo chose out three arrows from his quiver, laid out two, and placed the third on his string. "See, you," he said to Benedetto. "I will play with this toy, and you shall count my winnings."

Once he shot, and a man tumbled from his horse at the head of the nearest troop; twice he shot, and a horse, screaming, reared and fell backward among the footmen of the second group; a third time he shot, and among the nearest body of dismounted men there was a scurry as they bent over one who had fallen.

"Two men and one horse," Benedetto counted composedly. "Jacobo, I crave pardon. 'Tis no toy, but a very mangonel—see how they scatter for cover, down there!"

For Gaspar's three troops fled confusedly back across the drawbridge, to gain the shelter of the outer walls, and Jacobo roared with laughter at them, while Vittorio's men gaped at him, open-mouthed.

"Let us go hence," Vittorio bade. "I will lead down toward the open there. These three bands are setting out to hunt us, and it is for us to find hiding down in the ravines where one may hold back a score. To be caught here in the open would be rank folly."

"But the wine—the wine butt!" Jacobo pleaded.

Vittorio swung on him. "Get you to your place, and hold your wondrous arrows and your tongue till bidden shoot or speak," he bade. "We shall win this struggle by strict concord among ourselves, and there is more than one butt of wine in the world."

"And that," said Jacobo to Benedetto, "is a man of sense. He knows what he wants, and will get it. I see that I shall be in at the looting of that castle."

CESAR THE BLACK sent out his men again, troop by troop. One body was bidden pass through Sercona hamlet and search the plains, while

the other two divided the hills among themselves; the horsemen spread themselves out as scouts, with the foot to support them when Vittorio and his followers should be found. Cesar himself went back and reported to Gaspar, who had a mind to order the irons to be heated for the torturing of this young della Porta, but refrained when he thought how Vittorio had twice escaped his hold.

"Now," said Gaspar, "if they do not bring him in, I will hang one in every ten and order the rest flogged."

"Best not tell them that," said Black Cesar, shortly.

"Do you dare rebel, you hound?" Gaspar asked fiercely.

"Lord," said Cesar, stoutly, "you hold sway here by the merit of what you win for your men and what they win for you. There is uneasiness enough over the threat of short rations—let your hand lie lightly, lest there be worse than uneasiness."

Gaspar stroked his beard and considered it. He was a man of craft as well as of cruelty, and knew how far to go.

"There may be a touch of reason in that," he said. "For your part, see that the lady Ginevra is kept this side the drawbridge. She must not go beyond till this della Porta is laid by the heels."

With a nose for romance, Cesar grinned as he bowed obedience and withdrew from the presence. By this time most of the inhabitants of Gaspar's hold had an idea as to which way the wind blew, and since all knew that Gaspar had been an unjust steward, robbing Ginevra of her heritage since she had been placed in his charge, most of them had a secret sympathy with Vittorio's daring to remain about Sercona for her sake. Many of them had

seen her grow from child to woman, untouched and unsullied in the midst of lawlessness and black deeds, of which—be it said to Gaspar's credit—she was let see but little. Yet that was mainly because he hoped to hand her over to Rafael his kinsman, and so had her tended with care.

Now, when Cesar the Black sent out nearly the whole garrison of the castle in three bands, he was soldier enough to know that the men went out at grave disadvantage; there was the open space in front of the castle, which prevented any surprise attack but also prevented any surprise over the manner of setting out; and these three bands, each about fifty strong, stated their strength and their errand to any who might lie hidden to watch. And from what he already knew of this young della Porta, Cesar was not such a fool as to think his men could go out without Vittorio's knowledge.

Vittorio lay in the hills—of that Cesar felt certain; thus two bands went toward the hills, and only one toward the plain, and this last was not so much a searching party as a containing force, to head off the quarry in case it should flee from the hills down through Sercona, and hope to escape by way of the plain. Vittorio, hidden with his little band so near the castle that none of the searchers thought to look for him just there in the ravine depths, watched the forces pass and divide, and smiled. When they had gone he called up Benedetto and Paolo, while Jacobo came within hearing of his own accord, and Vittorio let him stay.

"IT IS a hunt, Benedetto, and you, Jacobo," he said. "The war between Gaspar and me is joined, now. And they think to trap us in the hills."

"For which reason," said Benedetto, "the hills are not for us."

"Saving one," Vittorio said slowly. He looked across at Jacobo. "But if there were a man who could shoot, and who could run and hide at need—a man who had wit as well as courage, that one man might make the parties in the hills *think* they had us there."

Benedetto looked at the leathern case on Jacobo's shoulders, and nodded. "Such a man might do such a thing," he remarked composedly.

"What say you, Jacobo?" Vittorio asked.

"I say—we left a butt of good wine in the hills," Jacobo answered. "Put me within reach of the spigot between shots, and if there be a horse left to either party by tomorrow night, then I break my bow and go herding pigs. A mark at a mile—ever a mark at a mile, and Jack o' the Bow is a happy man."

"Twist that spigot too often, and Gaspar's men will make a spigot of your neck," Paolo warned him.

"When this affair is over, I will drink a match with you," Jacobo challenged. "First under the table pays for the barrel."

"Done," Paolo agreed heartily.

"Away to the hills, Jacobo," Vittorio bade. "Shoot warily and fulfill your promise, and the barrel is my debt when you return."

With a rough salute Jacobo set off in the tracks of Gaspar's searching parties, who perforce kept together for the first part of their way—there was but the one track for them to travel.

Meanwhile Vittorio gathered his men about him, and told them what lay before them. "We have our bowman attending to the main body," he said, "and it is for us to disconcert and if

possible disperse this smaller party that heads down toward the plain. First, now, they will search the hamlet of Sercona most thoroughly, and over that they will take time. As I remember it, there is a hollow this side of Sercona, and when they have searched some one or two will come back to report, for all three parties must keep touch. They will not dream that we are here behind them, and thus we reduce their strength by one or two."

"And then, lord?" Paolo asked.

"Patience—one step at a time," Vittorio counselled. "But then, I think, we go on to the inn of the Seven Fishes, as it is named. They will draw that cover, remembering that Benedetto here once sought its shelter, when he laid hands on Andrea the page."

He moved them out from the ravine by ones, giving them the place of rendezvous, and they sneaked off gently enough, being the sort that is used to raids and forays. Last of all he went himself, not greatly trusting yet these men who had forsaken one master for another, and knowing that the thought of their own small numbers compared with Gaspar's strength might cause some one or two of them, perhaps more, to turn their coats yet again. It was then late afternoon, and sure enough he had made but half the distance to Sercona when he came upon Benedetto, who sat on the chest of Paolo, cross-bowman.

"OH, LAMENTABLE coward!" said Benedetto. "Lord, this earthworm set out to wriggle back to his hole, and I caught him. Do I wring his neck, or merely stab? 'Tis a pity to soil a knife, yet I fear to soil my hands. Hence, thus far, I sit on him."

"Let him up," Vittorio bade. So

Paolo stood upon his feet, breathing heavily, for Benedetto was a mighty weight, and he had pummeled Paolo most heartily for making an uneasy seat by squirming.

"You would go back to Gaspar?" Vittorio asked coldly.

The man made no answer; none was possible, for he had turned back from a set task, and his defection showed flagrant and unmistakable.

"Let him go, Benedetto," Vittorio bade, and Benedetto, having taken Paolo's crossbow and bolts, belt and dagger, and a few other trifles to which he had taken a fancy, stood away from his prisoner.

"Now get you back," Vittorio bade, "for no man of mine fails me twice. And when we come to the sack of the castle, as come we shall, get you in the front of the fighting so that you die decently, unless Gaspar hang you first for what you have already done. For if you are not killed in fight, I will hang you by the heels from the highest part of the ruin I leave there, and thus shall you hang till the crows come to feed on you. Get gone!"

They watched how Paolo slunk away at that final, fierce bidding. They saw him go up and up, slowly, draggingly, and that he once turned and came a little way back toward them, as if even yet he were not sure. But Benedetto made much show of laying an arrow in rest, and at that Paolo got behind a tree.

"Yet it was not wise to let him go," Benedetto said.

"Now look you," said Vittorio, "that man was instrumental in setting me free when Gaspar had me prisoner in the castle. He will go to Gaspar and confess, tell the tale of all that he has done and all that we are about to do—

and not one word will Gaspar believe. I have sent the man to his doom—he will tell Gaspar that we are bound for the plains, and Gaspar, hanging him as a double-faced spy still serving in my cause, will save us the dirty task of executing a traitor. No master will trust a man who has once turned to his enemy, least of all will this Count Gaspar. Paolo goes to his death."

And so it was. Cesar the Black took the man, at Gaspar's bidding, after his tale had been told, and hanged him in the great yard of the castle. And Gaspar himself knew Paolo was a liar, for there had come in a messenger already from the parties that had gone up to the hills, telling how they were on the track of Vittorio della Porta, who had with him the archer who had already wrought damage, and now had killed two horses with most damnable cunning.

For that, Gaspar began to tug at his golden beard most thoughtfully, for this enterprise looked uglier every day and with every happening. He had near on two hundred men, and a strong castle for his defence, and there had come out from Milan one youngster with a servant who had put the whole place in siege, and drawn out nearly all the garrison to hunt him down. Gaspar felt that he had embarked on this war in the hills far too light-heartedly; he should have gone out himself.

But before ever Paolo swung at the end of a rope, Vittorio had reached the hollow between Sercona and the hill track, where he judged it best to lie in ambush, and he found no others like-minded with Paolo, of whose recreancy they knew nothing. They were all stoutly willing to see this affair through, believing in their cause, and they lapped up the two men whom the

leader of the plains party sent back as messengers, bound them and brought them frightened to Vittorio, who sat in state with Benedetto standing behind him.

"Messengers," he commented at sight of them, as if he had not known before seeing them. "Bid them send for Pietro."

NOW Pietro was that one whom Vittorio had saved from hanging at Gaspar's hands, and he stepped forth, to be recognized instantly by the two as one of their old-time comrades. Vittorio turned to him.

"What sort are these two men, Pietro?" he asked coldly.

"He on the right, lord, whom they call Bernard, is a sound man," Pietro answered, "but that other, whom we called the Wiggler, because of his way of lying himself out of trouble, is the one who killed the father of the child you rescued."

"How killed him—at Gaspar's bidding?" Vittorio asked.

Pietro gestured a negative. "Gaspar's men had the man held, and Gaspar had but then taken the child. The man called out to pray that the child might be restored, and before any could judge what to do the Wiggler thrust a dagger through the man's heart. Then Gaspar laughed, and the Wiggler laughed too."

"Let us have confirmation of this—let any speak who was there," Vittorio bade, and his voice was like ice.

Two men stepped forward, corroborating what Pietro had told. Then Vittorio asked the Wiggler if this were true, and though his tongue denied it his shaking knees and his face confirmed all.

"You shall take him away among

yourselves," Vittorio said, "and do this thing as you will. But before we leave this place to go on our way, I will see him so done by as he did by the father of that child—let me see him with a dagger in his heart."

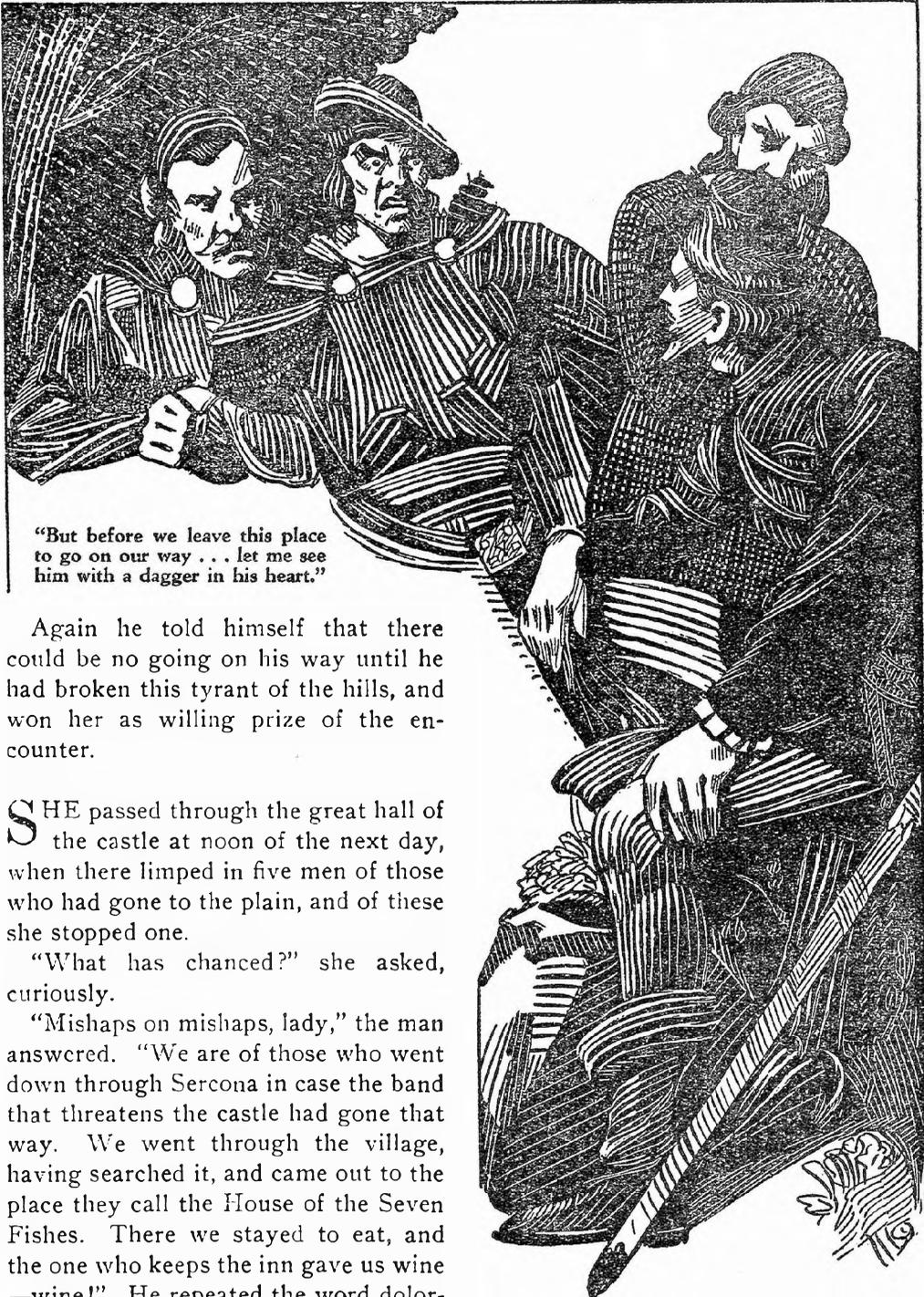
He rose up to go, but Benedetto stopped him. "Lord, what of this Bernard, as they name him?"

"Ah!" said Vittorio, "tell him how I pay those who serve me, give him back his arms, and let him have choice. He may go back, to hang with the rest of Gaspar's men whom we capture alive, or he may stay with us. Let it be as he decides."

And there was a man the more in the company when, before they set out for the Inn of the Seven Fishes that night, Vittorio had looked on the Wiggler, who would wriggle no more.

It was dark when they set out, by twos and threes, having appointed their rendezvous. There came a noise of drunken singing from the village of Sercona, where Gaspar's men, knowing that those in the hills had all the hunting on their hands, billeted themselves well till dawn and the need for more than a sentry or two to keep watch on the track by which they had come down. Like spectres the little party crept past, to establish themselves in readiness for the morrow's work as Vittorio had planned it.

As for him, he looked back the way they had come, to where in the darkness of the hills Gaspar's castle sat invisible. Within its walls, he knew, was Ginevra. Did she think of him, or had she come to believe that he had given up the quest of her? Yet he remembered how he had sat with her under the monastery wall, and felt sure that she remembered as he remembered, perhaps hoped as he hoped.



"But before we leave this place to go on our way . . . let me see him with a dagger in his heart."

Again he told himself that there could be no going on his way until he had broken this tyrant of the hills, and won her as willing prize of the encounter.

SHE passed through the great hall of the castle at noon of the next day, when there limped in five men of those who had gone to the plain, and of these she stopped one.

"What has chanced?" she asked, curiously.

"Mishaps on mishaps, lady," the man answered. "We are of those who went down through Sercona in case the band that threatens the castle had gone that way. We went through the village, having searched it, and came out to the place they call the House of the Seven Fishes. There we stayed to eat, and the one who keeps the inn gave us wine—wine!" He repeated the word dolorously, as if the thought of it were sad.

"Why should he not give you wine?" she asked.

"Such wine never was," he mourned. "There was in it some potent drug, for

they all went mad and quarrelled among themselves. And at the height of their quarrelling they were set on—we were set on—by a fierce and bloodthirsty army of ruffians who sworded and stabbed as they would among us. Only we who had good legs escaped."

She divined a panic and a rout, and wondered how this man and his fellows would face Gaspar, who had a short way with those who failed in their errands. "How many escaped?" she asked.

The man shook his head. "There was a young man with eyes of flame who laughed as he killed among us," he answered, "and between him and a giant such as I have never seen, together with traitors who were once our own men, I know not how many they killed. Some they captured and held, and we five escaped. It is an evil war—an evil war!"

The story might be incredible, but it was an age of incredible things, and that nearly a score sober and resolute men should conquer some fifty half-drunken opponents was nothing beyond credence. And here were the five survivors to attest the truth of the story—they had not dared to come back if their tale were false. She let the man go on with his fellows, and went to her own room high up in the southern tower, whence she could look out toward Sercona and the plain.

"He wins," she told herself. "He wins." She recalled the man's description, "a young man with eyes of flame who laughed as he killed," and she pictured her hero terrible, raging in fight, as he had been gentle and tender with her. She looked out eagerly, lest even then he might be on his way toward the castle, to end her wardship with Gaspar and take her out to happiness. She

waited as women of that age were used to waiting, for the fearful thrill of pleasure that comes of being taken, willing, by force.

And Gaspar, having heard the tale of the five men, was strangely lenient over it. He did not bid Cesar the Black hang them, as was generally expected, but set Andrea in charge of a party which got out powder and balls for the culverins on each side of the gateway, while others made ready pitch and lead for melting.

Then, late in the day, he sent out a messenger to the parties searching the hills, bidding them return instantly to the castle, abandoning their search for the time. He had need of a strong body to go down to Sercona and get in provisions, and there were not enough men left to him for that as things were. He meant to get in stores in case of siege, and when that was done he would go out himself and hunt down this Vittorio who had changed the course of life, and made the castle a mere refuge rather than a threat to the country over which it towered menacingly.

He waited through another day, but no man came back to him. Vittorio's men, supremely confident of final victory by reason of their initial successes, trapped the messenger on his way, and no word went through to the searching parties. For, having utterly broken the party on the plain, Vittorio with his men had gone to wage the war in the hills.

And as days went by, and greater gloom fell on those within the castle, Ginevra's hopes ran high; soon, she knew, her lover would come for her.

CHAPTER V

BENEDETTO, using the point of his dagger with skill, gouged away



She waited as women of that age were used to waiting, for the fearful thrill of pleasure of being taken, willing, by force.

the last morsel from the blade-bone of a sheep, and obviously relished it. Then he licked the bone cleaner still, and threw it away into the bracken among which Vittorio and his men lay for the night.

"Down in the castle below there, they might have been glad of that bone," he said. "Gaspar may yet send out to fetch it."

"If our master is right in his count," said Pietro, now in some sort a leader in their little band, "the Count has few men to send."

"A castle is a useful place," said Benedetto gravely, "if the walls are built of good bread and honest meat. While we sit to bar the way up from Sercona, Gaspar and his men must eat stone."

"A slow matter, starving them out," said Pietro. "From my knowledge of it, there is food there for them all for another two months to come, so they eat sparingly of their meat."

"Two months, Pietro?" Vittorio's voice spoke out of the shadows beyond the glow of their camp fire.

"So, lord," said Pietro, rising to his feet. "For the Count used to say that though no man dare put him to a siege, yet he would be prepared, lest the devil himself should sit on the drawbridge."

Vittorio came forward into the light, and the glow of the embers lighted up his strong young face. "Scatter the fire, now that its work is done, Benedetto," he bade. "These summer nights will let you sleep fireless, and though we are well concealed in this hollow, yet there are more than a hundred men yet out in the hills, hunting for us."

Benedetto set to work, as did the rest who sat around. But before their task was quite accomplished, Vittorio bade them cease.

"I have a thought that we might yet give the searchers something to find," he said. "If we made up the fire so that its glow showed in the sky, Benedetto, we might cause some inquiry among these men who hunt us, and while they are intent on the fire we might turn hunters. No one of them can reckon our strength or weakness in the darkness of these hills, and if we catch a score of them with our score, it will be so much the less to accomplish in daylight."

"Sound strategy," Benedetto commented. He bade the men set to work to feed what was left of the fire, so that they might nurse to life a roaring blaze that would reflect on the undersides of tree tops, and thus betray its presence.

What would come of it they could not tell, but Vittorio had come past any thought of fear to a confidence in the end of this affair. He had come out with one man; he had now a band of twenty, mostly deserters from Gaspar's following, and therefore the more bitter against Gaspar; with that impossibly small force he had broken a third of the Count's strength, and reduced the tyranny of the castle to a sort of sullen defensiveness — all through recklessly bold action. His own men were joyously confident as regarded the ultimate issue, in view of what had already been accomplished, and somewhere away in the hills was that lean and saturnine Jacobo with his terrible long bow, picking off Gaspar's searchers from incredible distances, rendering their task a work of terror to themselves.

They made their fire up to the dimensions of a signal beacon, and drew off from it, crossing a shallow ravine to lie off in the darkness and await what might come of the ruse. They had built it in a deep hollow, ostensibly

well-concealed, but such a glare as was made by this great flame could not fail of being seen. With arms at hand, and fully in readiness for any chance, they waited.

A MILE away, Cesar the Black went the rounds of the castle for the night; he visited the guardhouse by the gate, in which was the windlass of the drawbridge, and saw that all was well; he went to the doorway of the southern tower in which were the women's quarters, and in which Ginevra had her place, and saw that the sentry there was wakeful; then he climbed to the top of the big central tower, and there the sentry pointed out to him a flame in the forest.

"It grew up but a half hour ago," the sentry told him. "There were flitting figures in the light at first, but now they have all gone."

"Lying by their fire asleep," Cesar surmised. "But our men are searching the hills, surely, not holding the ways down so close to us."

He gazed at the fire awhile. "It will be invisible from the far side," he said, "and that della Porta reckons on safety so long as the men in the hills see nothing. It is his fire—may devils flay him! But if we—sentry, go you down to our master, find Andrea the page who is with him, and tell him that his enemy sleeps in false security near by. I will watch here till you return."

The sentry went down and crossed the great hall of the castle to the door of the room in which Vittorio had stunned and bound the Count while he made his own escape. The door, ajar, showed how Gaspar sat glooming in the candlelight, and by him sat Andrea the page, silent because his master was in no mood for talk. Usually, Gaspar

would throw dice with the boy, or find some way of passing the time, but the threat to the safety of the castle that had sprung up in the past few days turned him to moody thought instead.

After a while Andrea caught the sentry's efforts to attract attention, and came out to him. He heard Cesar's message, and went back to his master, who looked up at his re-entry.

"This Vittorio and his hogs sleep in sight of us," Andrea announced. "Cesar asks if you will come to the tower top to say what may be done with them while the chance holds."

Gaspar got on his feet, and without reply went to the stair and mounted it, Andrea and the sentry following. They came out on the embattled top of the tower, and there Cesar leaned on the parapet and looked toward the glow in the nearer recesses of the hills. Gaspar moved up beside him and looked too.

"It may be our own men," he said, without preface.

"Not so, lord Count," said Cesar, "for if they had been so near, then the messengers we sent out to them had brought back an answer before this. Vittorio della Porta and his men sleep there tonight, and we must send out fresh messengers, if we would get word to our own people. I asked you to come and see, thinking you might will an attack."

Gaspar gazed long with replying. "You think," he said at last, "that he captured our messengers?"

"Else had some word come back to us before this," said Cesar. "Four days have passed—"

"It is a trap," Gaspar insisted. "Such a fire, lighted by other than our own men—a lure to draw us out to it."

"Why should he set a trap?" Cesar asked confidently. "There are our men

on the far side of him, and us on this side—if he showed his presence by such a trick, it would be but to invite attack from both sides at once. No, lord Count—this Vittorio knows that his fire is hidden from the far side, and thinks we value our safety here too much to venture out in search of him.”

THERE was a suggestion of hope that Gaspar would risk an attack, in that last affirmation. Gaspar turned from looking at the fire, which was dying down now.

“How many men have we fit for the field, Cesar?”

Cesar made a mental calculation. “Some thirty, all told,” he answered. “The five who came in from the fight on the plain are counted in that number—if you thought of attack, they could stay here as guard on the gate. This della Porta has but a handful, and if we surprise them we can easily overcome them all.”

“Get a score under arms,” Gaspar bade abruptly. “Tell them our mission—I will lead them out. There is but one point for care, and it is that this Vittorio must be taken alive, if it may be done. What I do to him will put such a terror on these hills that no man shall dare to oppose me again.”

From the quiet gentleness with which he said it, you had thought that he would treat this Vittorio della Porta as a friend. He stayed on the tower roof while Cesar went to summon the men-at-arms, for he was estimating in his mind the precise position of the fire, lest it should be burnt out by the time they reached to its location. In the end he went down, Andrea following, and made ready to lead the attack. Cesar the Black was in the courtyard when

Gaspar, Andrea still following him, came out.

“Do you stay here, Cesar,” Gaspar bade, “and guard our walls. I will bring in this della Porta before dawn.”

“Heaven send it fall that way!” Cesar breathed piously, and withdrew from the party to go to the guardhouse.

The drawbridge creaked down, and Gaspar marched out at the head of his band. They carried swords and a few pikes among them; it would be all hand-to-hand work in the darkness, Gaspar knew, and crossbows would be of no avail. He marched out across the plateau in front of the castle, padding silently through the summer darkness, and after him his men stole like cats a-courting, stealthy and sinister. Presently the plateau was emptied of their shapes, and they went down to the darkness of the track that led away up toward the hills.

LYING beside his master, the giant Benedetto suddenly stiffened so that Vittorio felt the movement. “Hst, master!” he whispered. “We have baited a trap for hounds, and caught the huntsman!”

“How?” Vittorio whispered back.

“Marching men from behind us—the castle garrison sallies out.”

Vittorio listened, and in a minute or less he knew it for truth. Sound carried far in the stillness, and in the distance below their level they could hear footsteps, and ever and again a word spoken cautiously. They lay back a quarter-mile or so from their fire, and as the approaching party neared them its progress grew more silent, as if the attackers would make utter surprise of their assault on who might be by the fire.

“By all the saints!” Benedetto whis-

pered again, but this time with a note of exultation. "Master — before us! Here come the searchers from the hills, and we have but to lie quiet and pray that the fire shows no great light. Gaspar will rush on his own men, mistaking them for us, unless one or other calls out in time."

Over a rise away to their left they saw dark figures come out against the sky and drop down toward the hollow in which they had made their fire. From the far side of the hollow, too, dark shapes showed, coming to meet these others, and at one and the same time the two parties sighted each other. Yet each trusted that the other had not seen it, and so they went down, Vittorio and his men watching, into the dimness about the embers to which the fire had died. Then with a rush they went at each other, Gaspar raging because he had not caught his enemy asleep as he had hoped, and the others equally furious at having found alert men where they had hoped to fall on sleepers.

There came the clash of their meeting, the sound of steel grinding on steel, cries, shrieks, and then Gaspar roaring like a bull—none could mistake that voice, and as the party from the hills drew off the castle men made at them. Vittorio called gently to his men, who were lying fascinated by the scene of Gaspar's bands killing off each other.

"Draw back!" he bade. "In a little time they will come to sense, and our chance passes quickly."

"Whither, master?" Benedetto inquired, as he got to his feet.

"To the castle itself," Vittorio answered. "They are out here in the hills, near on all the strength of the place, and the drawbridge will be down, awaiting their return. They must stay to count their losses inflicted on each

other, to find out who made such a fire, and to tend their wounded. In that time we may do much, if we will."

AS GASPAR and his men had come, silently and singly, they went off down the hill path toward where the track to the castle branched off from the main way down toward Sercona. But at the edge of the plateau a solitary figure standing in the gloom challenged—

"Halt—or die!"

"Jacobo!" Benedetto called, but softly, lest any in the castle guardhouse should hear.

"I know that voice." The archer came toward them as he spoke. "But one bull of a man grows in that key, methinks. I was joyously shooting men in the hills when all of a sudden they turned on me, and hunted me past a great fire down to this place. There have been feet padding behind me in the dark even to this spot."

"Our feet, Jacobo," Vittorio assured him, and then the rest was soon told by Benedetto, of how the fire had tricked both Gaspar and the party that had come down out of the hills.

"I have but three arrows left," Jacobo mourned. "The rest stick in these brigands, who have had no rest since I first strung bow against them. I have sat up trees and shot, I have shot from incredible distances — I have pulled string against them till they prayed for the dark to come and hide them, and I have shot them beside their fires till they prayed for daylight that they might hunt me. They are tired men, those who went to the hills, and those I shot are so tired that they will never move again. A plague on all crossbows, say I."

"Then let it be the last word," Vit-

torio bade, "for we must waste no time. Do you go on before, Jacobo, with your three arrows, toward the castle entrance, and at the far end of the drawbridge you may find a sentry on watch. Can you shoot him in the throat, so that he will not cry out, think you?"

"Let me but get within sight of him, and you shall choose the tooth in his mouth for my arrow to strike on," Jacobo said confidently.

"Then away," Vittorio bade, "for we must follow on with speed, lest Count Gaspar return to the defence of his castle before we can seize it and hold it against him."

The bowman seemed to melt into the night, and Vittorio's party went on more slowly and cautiously toward where, gigantic shadow outthrusting from the wall of cliff, the castle loomed silent and grim. No light showed from any of its arrow-slits; they felt their way across the sward, Pietro leading, since he knew the way, and then again a line of shadow loomed before them—Jacobo came close.

"Is there a sentry?" Vittorio whispered.

"There was," Jacobo answered, whispering too. "There are men in their guardhouse, and the door stands open."

Now the doorway of this guardhouse faced toward the main gateway of the castle, and now, near on it, they could see the dim reflection of the guard's candlelight on the stone of the castle wall. Over the drawbridge Benedetto, Vittorio and Pietro padded noiselessly, and after them came sixteen men to whom this castle had given shelter until they deserted Gaspar to follow the fortunes of his enemy. With a leap and a roar Benedetto went through the guardhouse door; within the place three men lay on wooden beds, and Cesar the

Black sat by the rough table on which the rough candle burned. The three sprang up almost as soon as Cesar, too slow to meet Benedetto's attack, went crashing down beside the table under a blow from a great fist iron-hard.

They had no time to draw arms or meet their opponents fairly—like rats in a flood they were caught, and died. There was no time for finessing, for Gaspar might be hard on the heels of the attackers, for all they knew. Benedetto dragged out Cesar's senseless body to the open; the others were past further power of resistance, in this world.

"Up with the bridge!" Vittorio bade. "Pietro—you know the way of the windlass. Take what men you need, and hoist it up."

BEFORE them now was the great gateway of the castle, a score yards or more from the gate house. Stalking up—and now his heels rang loudly on the stone—Vittorio pushed at the little wicket set in the gate itself, to find that it yielded readily and showed black darkness beyond. He stood for seconds listening to the creaking of the windlass as the drawbridge came up.

"Safe," he said. "Until dawn, Gaspar is hedged away—the place is ours by then. Jacobo?"

The archer was beside him on the instant.

"Take charge of the guardhouse with three others. Count Gaspar and his men will come to find the bridge up in a very little time. This post is yours to hold while we secure all within the castle."

"Secure one good butt of wine for me, lord, for my very throat shrinks at the thought of water. I have drunk

nought else these past five days. While I live, the guardhouse is yours."

Without further word Vittorio turned from him. Pietro was at hand, and at his master's bidding he gave an outline of what the castle held, how its inner towers were disposed, and where sentries might be found posted. They knew nothing of what strength Gaspar had left when he set out at the lure of the fire; they were all unprepared for this chance which had given them the prize they sought without a fight for it, and Vittorio went warily every step, not knowing if a score men might break out on him at any moment.

They filed in through the great gateway, into utter blackness. When all had passed through to the great hall, Pietro groped his way to Gaspar's own little chamber at the far side, and there found candles and flint and steel and tinder. The lights they took round showed the place as utterly empty; Gaspar had stripped his castle in the hope of capturing his prey, and so had lost it.

Pietro led them out to the foot of the southern tower, and there a pacing sentry gaped and yelled—once. Then Benedetto's hand closed on his throat, and he was bound and taken away. Searching, they found eight others who slept, secure in the knowledge that the drawbridge was guarded, and these with Cesar the Black and the sentry on the southern tower they bundled into the dungeon that had once held Vittorio himself, for it was airy and cool and, as Benedetto remarked, men have slept on worse beds than a stone floor.

So, with incredible ease, the great task was done. They lighted candles in the great hall, and Vittorio bade them get out such wine and food as

they could find, and eat and drink their fill.

"For there is a fight before us," he explained. "Drink wisely and eat well. We have won thus far by wit, but with the dawn we may need all the strength we have to back our brains."

Benedetto nodded agreement. "If any man's skull grows thick through overmuch wine, I will split it myself, master," he said. "We have won too much to lose it through folly."

Jacobo came in to them, and Vittorio swung to face him. "Lord," he said, "there is a body of men at the front gate, clamoring that the bridge should be let down. I have not answered them."

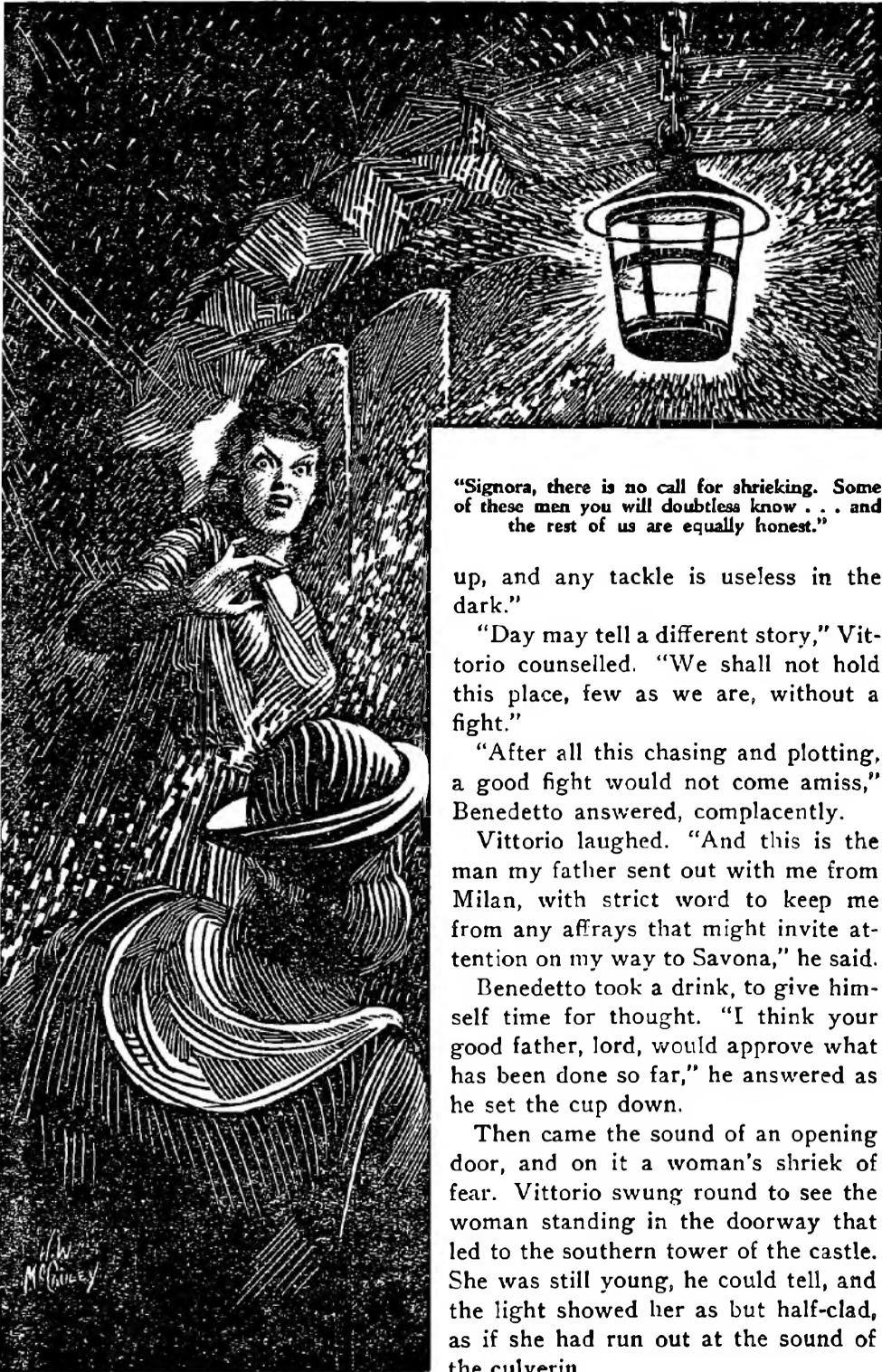
"There are also culverins by the front gate," Vittorio answered drily. "There may be powder in the guardhouse—I saw balls piled beside the guns. And it may be that you know how to touch off the charge."

Jacobo grinned. "Trust me," he said, and went back.

THEN, the larders of the place having been ransacked, Vittorio and his men set to eating in the great hall by candlelight. Stores had not yet run low in the place, and Pietro found the wine cellars, knowing them from old time. While they ate and drank, talking among themselves, mainly over the ridiculous ease of this enterprise, there came a thunderous roar, at which Vittorio merely smiled.

"Our good bowman is talking," he suggested.

"There will be some killed, some wounded and some seriously scared," Benedetto remarked. "There will be no reply, for they cannot force the entry without tackle, the drawbridge being



"Signora, there is no call for shrieking. Some of these men you will doubtless know . . . and the rest of us are equally honest."

up, and any tackle is useless in the dark."

"Day may tell a different story," Vittorio counselled. "We shall not hold this place, few as we are, without a fight."

"After all this chasing and plotting, a good fight would not come amiss," Benedetto answered, complacently.

Vittorio laughed. "And this is the man my father sent out with me from Milan, with strict word to keep me from any affrays that might invite attention on my way to Savona," he said.

Benedetto took a drink, to give himself time for thought. "I think your good father, lord, would approve what has been done so far," he answered as he set the cup down.

Then came the sound of an opening door, and on it a woman's shriek of fear. Vittorio swung round to see the woman standing in the doorway that led to the southern tower of the castle. She was still young, he could tell, and the light showed her as but half-clad, as if she had run out at the sound of the culverin.

"Signora," he remarked, "there is no call for shrieking. Some of these men you will doubtless know, since they once served Count Gaspar, and the rest of us are equally honest."

The woman came forward into the full light of the candles. "It is—it is Pietro," she said, staring at the man. "And these—but this ugly giant—who is it, Pietro?"

"I am Benedetto, the mildest lamb in this flock, my lady," said Benedetto with a smirk. "We seek shelter here from a band of ruffians under one named Gaspar, who has chased us to the very gate of the place."

A little laugh rippled through all the members of the band at this simple description of their exploit. The woman stared, still half frightened and altogether puzzled.

Vittorio moved toward her. "Signora," he said, "there is one here, the lady Ginevra, of the Alderoni family, once ward of Count Gaspar. If it were possible before dawn, I would see her."

She regarded him more closely; most of the rest she knew, and would trust no more than any other of Gaspar's men. Benedetto was an unknown and incalculable. But this man who faced her was of a different order, and she made him a curtsy that was half involuntary.

"I can find her," she answered. "Who asks, lord—what name shall I give when I tell her?"

"Say that Vittorio della Porta has come to say that which might not be said when we met at the monastery gate," he bade.

After a momentary pause she turned away without answering, and went back the way she had come. Then Vittorio turned toward Benedetto.

"There is a room over there—" he

said, indicating the little room which Gaspar had kept for his own private use—"where I may talk with this lady. See that candles are placed and the room itself put in order, in case Gaspar should have left any trace of himself there."

Benedetto rose, and signalled to one of the men to come with him. He took four candles from a stock that had been found and placed on the great central table. One other of the band made a remark in a low voice, and there was a chuckle from those near him—but before the chuckle had died to silence Vittorio stood by the man, grasping him by the throat, and lifted him to his feet.

"One other such word, and a rope shall choke you from ever speaking again," he growled out. "This lady will leave the castle as my wife."

He flung the man from him, waited while he crashed down against the table and recovered himself, and then separated himself from the band to stand apart and wait until Ginevra should come to him.

BUT then Jacobo came back from the guardhouse; the heads of all turned toward him, anxiously, for every man there knew that he sat in peril in this place—Count Gaspar was not one to loose his hold while a breath remained to him; they had won the castle, without loss among themselves, but Gaspar equally had suffered little, and somewhere without were over a hundred armed men who would fight for their own when day came and gave them light to try the fosse that the drawbridge spanned. Jacobo came to his master, and they hung on his words.

"Lord Vittorio," he said, "there is a bull of a man outside who clamors for

a word with you. Calls himself Count Gaspar. I wasted an arrow on him, the first that has missed its mark in three months, and since I have but one more—”

“Come,” Vittorio broke in, and went back through the great gate to stand by the raised drawbridge. Jacobo followed, and they saw how on the far side of the fosse two torches flared, while between them stood the great, golden-bearded count, waiting quietly. Since no torch showed on the near side, Gaspar could not see who faced him across the ditch.

“Greeting, wolf,” Vittorio called. “Are the dews damp on that beard of yours?”

Beside him Jacobo chuckled, and in the light of the torches they could see Gaspar’s teeth between his lips that snarled at the taunt.

“I come to find jackals in my lair,” Gaspar answered, with his deadly quiet, “but to make a bargain instead of rending them.”

“There can be no bargain,” Vittorio answered composedly. “Gaspar of Sercona is too bloody a beast for that.”

Still Gaspar kept his temper down. “Come forth, you and all who hold to you, and I will swear on the Cross to let you all go forth unscathed, Vittorio della Porta,” he said. “Come forth thus, leaving Ginevra my ward untouched, and no harm shall come to a man of you. Refuse, and if need be I will tear my own castle down a stone at a time, that you and yours may die such deaths as shall make men shriek when my name is spoken.”

“No man was ever yet killed by words, Count,” Vittorio answered. “Get you back to safety—flee to the south, for in Naples are bigger brag-garts, even, than you have proved. Get

hence while there is a chance, for castle and ward Ginevra alike are no longer yours—you have cursed this country long enough, and will terrorize it no more. Here I sit with my men for as long as I will, and when I leave this place there will be a pile of stones to tell Sercona that its people have nothing more to fear.”

“I will give you till dawn to consider my offer,” Gaspar persisted. “Until then, I will make no attack.”

Vittorio laughed, easily. “Take all the time you will,” he bade, “but come no more for my answer to your threats, lest a bolt should be the answer. And now, since this night air is chill, I will bid you farewell, Count Gaspar. If we meet again, it will not be with the tongue that I shall speak.”

Gaspar spat out a filthy oath in answer, and at that Vittorio turned from him. “Keep your guard, Jacobo,” he bade, “and if any come again with offers, let the culverins answer.”

He went back then into the great hall, leaving Jacobo at the guardhouse with his three men, one of whom stood, protected by the drawbridge, to watch the fosse—though its precipitous sides rendered watching hardly necessary till there was light to place ladders—if Gaspar could get them. Even then, the mighty stone walls stood to fend off possible attack; so long as the holders of the castle chose to remain within its walls, and had provisions to last them, nothing short of a siege train could fetch them out.

BACK in the hall Vittorio saw the lady of his dreams. She stood in the doorway that led to the southern tower, her little head flung back proudly as she faced Benedetto and the men who watched her, but she started for-

ward, a different look on her face, as Vittorio came into the candlelight. He went straight to her, heedless of the rest, and faced her. The white beauty of her made him almost afraid.

"I have come to you, Ginevra." It was all he could think to say, and to himself the obvious, banal words seemed foolish. But she smiled.

"In some strange fashion," she answered. "I heard the culverins."

"Gaspar is raging without," he said. "I have had a room made ready, where I might speak with you."

He led her across to the little room at the side of the hall, and closed its door. There she faced him, questioningly, but not afraid.

"Then you have not fought Gaspar?" she asked.

"Not yet," he answered. "He went out to capture me, and I slipped past him with my men. The impossibility of the venture was its success."

"But—success?" she queried. "With Gaspar without?"

"It is not ended yet," he told her. "At each encounter, so far, I have won, but the sternest encounter of all is to come. I said I would speak with you, intending to ask if you would trust yourself here, or in Gaspar's care, since you are his ward and I have no right over you. Even more would I question this now, for Gaspar offers me and my men safe-conduct if we go out, leaving you untouched."

"He would not keep his word," she answered.

"He would swear it on the Cross," Vittorio urged.

"And what, think you, is an oath more or less to such as Count Gaspar?" she queried, with a trace of sarcasm.

"My question to you is still unanswered," he reminded her. "Will you

go out to the man who calls himself your guardian, or will you trust the issue of the struggle under our care?"

She looked him full in the eyes, as clearly and fearlessly as she had looked up at him on the night when he rescued the child Gaspar had stolen from its mother.

"Why do you ask this?" she counter-queried. "Would you let me go to him, so easily?"

He had but one step to take, and she lay unresisting in his arms, her face lifted up for his kisses.

"I will hold you and wear you, now and always," he whispered. "As in dreams I have held you, Ginevra."

Thus he held her, knowing that whatever the day might bring he had had his payment in this hour. And she, yielding, planning what their future should be when the last struggle had come and passed, knew the meaning of life at last.

"I, too, have dreamed," she told him, "but dreams are futile beside the great reality."

In the great hall without, his men slept clothed and armed, as men will sleep before a fight; by the drawbridge, Jacobo and his three kept guard; over the machicolated towers of the castle crept a faint greyness, the first fore-runner of the dawn.

CHAPTER VI

THE light was yet uncertain when Jacobo, roused by the man he had left on watch, came out from the guard-house by the drawbridge and saw how a slim figure of a man approached the edge of the fosse, bearing a big square of white linen tied to a spear shaft. It was Andrea, Gaspar's page, who came on to the falling-point of the draw-

bridge and stood facing Jacobo.

"What would you, cockerel?" Jacobo asked. "'Tis over-late to ask for a night's lodging, though we have spare beds a-plenty, seeing that we be but a small force, and this roost was built to hold all Gaspar's chickens."

"Peace to your gibing, fool," Andrea snorted. "Call hither that della Porta who sneaked by us in the dark to steal an empty hold. I speak for a man, and would have him listen while he has yet two ears."

Jacobo sat down placidly, his legs dangling down into the fosse.

"'Tis none too warm yet, out here," he remarked, "but the morning air is mighty refreshing. I did wrong to barter words with a half-fledged youngling that knows not the difference between a man and a mutton-bone. The saints send breakfast soon, for I grow hungry."

"Will you take my message, you fool?" Andrea barked.

"Jump the fosse and take it yourself," Jacobo retorted, and yawned. "If it were a word that a man might take from a man to a man, then I might bestir myself. But a rag of conceit that comes from a master-thief to talk of stealing—faugh!"

He spat into the fosse, and yawned again.

Andrea, seeing he would get no further this way, tried another.

"Good master archer," he asked, "I pray you to go to your lord, Vittorio della Porta, and say that I, Andrea, page to Count Gaspar, am come with a message from my master, that we may compound over this matter of a castle and some killings."

Jacobo got slowly to his feet. "That," he said, "is a blade of another metal. Wait you there, Andrea, and I will see

if my lord Vittorio is yet awake. Weighty matters of strategy kept him late last night, and it may be that you must cool your heels in the dew for an hour or so. But I will see."

He sauntered off, slowly enough, to and through the main gate of the great hold. Andrea paced about, under the eye of the sentry all the time, and at the end of half an hour, or more, Jacobo returned; with him came Vittorio della Porta.

"Say your message," Vittorio bade sharply.

"From Count Gaspar, lord of this castle," Andrea answered glibly. "Come forth, you and all yours, to save bloodshed, and if the lady Ginevra be unharmed you shall all go free, for the Count my master is inclined to leniency, and understands that full half his men may be needed and slain before you be all killed. He would avoid this useless bloodshed while he may. Therefore if you will come forth, leaving all things as he left them last night, there shall no harm come to any one of you. And if you will not, then will Count Gaspar tear down these walls stone by stone if that be necessary, lest a man of you should remain alive."

"SO," SAID Vittorio, gravely, and stood awhile to think. While thus he stood, the sun came up over the pines at the far side of the plateau on to which the drawbridge gave, and its first rays shone on him, young and splendid, an embodiment of the restless times in which his lot was cast. A born fighter, with the brain of a man twice his age, slenderly strong, he faced Gaspar's page and messenger, and at last spoke.

"When no one stone is left on another, I will come forth," he answered. "Tell Gaspar I thought him less a fool

than to think I would trust his word for safe-conduct with these my men. If he would seek further answer, let him face these two culverins that once were his, win the castle that is his no more. Let him sit down to siege, if he will, and we within will care nothing, for the castle was provisioned for all his force, and we are but a few."

"That is the answer I must take back?" Andrea questioned.

"Aye, and this with it," Vittorio answered. "I will make no terms with that bloody thief you call master. I will never trust his word, and I will hunt him down to death as I have trapped him out from his hole, so that Sercona and all the countryside shall no more know fear—so that there shall be no more murders at Gaspar's bidding, no more broken homes and weeping women. Take that answer—go!"

Silently Andrea turned and went back. They saw him cross the level of sward on to which the great gateway of the castle fronted, and then Vittorio went within, sending out another of his small band of men to take Jacobo's place, and bidding Jacobo attend at a council he would hold in the great hall. There, when Jacobo came, he found Vittorio, and by him the lady Ginevra, young and very lovely, and apparently more than content at the capture of the castle. There, too, sat Benedetto beside his master, and by him the man Pietro, in some sort a leader of this band that had forsaken Gaspar to aid Vittorio in dragging down their former master. With a rough obeisance toward Vittorio and the lady Ginevra, Jacobo seated himself at the table.

"Friends," said Vittorio, "thus far have we won by wit. We have put fear into Gaspar's men, and destroyed not a few of them. We have captured Gas-

par's castle, and barred him out with his following. Twice, once in person last night and once in this hour through his page, Andrea, has Gaspar offered us free passage out from this place, for he knows that he is as a snail torn out from its shell. By means of hostages, perhaps, we might clinch him to his word, and win free, but such is not my purpose. So we gather here to question how we may tempt this Gaspar to a fight on even terms, as nearly as may be, so to break once and for all time the evil power that has terrorized about these hills, and down on the plain."

"There, lord," said Jacobo, "is the problem, well set forth. It seems that we here must find the answer."

"Such is our purpose," Vittorio answered composedly. "To me, it appears there is but one way, and that full tedious. Yet I see no other, as things stand now."

"And that way, lord?" Benedetto inquired.

"To do nothing," Vittorio answered. "While we keep a guard by the draw-bridge, Gaspar can never force the fosse. Short of rams and implements of siege, he cannot storm the castle, and while we lie quiet within he can do nothing. His men are held to him by fear, and by no other power, and they will melt as the summer passes, until there are left not so many as we ourselves number, for Gaspar's strength lay in the holding of this place, whence he could do as he would with the homes of the countryside, to retreat here and sit beyond punishment."

BENEDETTO nodded repeatedly in agreement; Pietro, on the other hand, shook his head slowly and doubtfully.

"Say on, Pietro," Vittorio bade.

"Lord," said that worthy, "Gaspar's men are bound to him not only by fear of himself, but also by fear of retribution for their many crimes. If a man would desert his master, there must be some other master to whom he would desert, as did I and these who followed me. Now Gaspar's men know full well that if they so much as show themselves in Sercona, or in any like place, without means of defence and looking for a new master, there will be a rope swung over a tree and they will tighten it by means of their necks. They dare not desert Gaspar."

"Then you have a plan to tell us?" Vittorio questioned.

Pietro shook his head. "Would that I had!" he said, piously.

"And you, Lady Ginevra—I bade you attend our conference that you might hear what we would do—I would have you know that there is no deceit in these my men," Vittorio turned to her as he spoke. "It may be that you, knowing more of this Gaspar and his ways, can light on a plan for us."

"Hard though it may be, I would say wait," she answered. "I know some little of the ways of him who was my guardian, and to me it seems that a night or two among the dews, ranging for food from day to day for himself and his men, will drive the Count to such rage as will make him set out some fresh proposal, from which we may devise a plan. There are times when it is wisest to sit still, irksome though that may be."

The four men nodded agreement. "Spoken like a general!" said Jacobo. "Trust a woman to find a way."

"It is wise, in truth," Vittorio agreed. "For this day we will do nothing, but wait for another messenger of truce to make proposals. And, Lady Ginevra, I

grieve that the decision makes you prisoner here among us, since none can leave the castle."

He stood, as if to end the brief conference. Ginevra stood up beside him, and Jacobo nodded approvingly at the fine pair they made, standing side by side.

"My lord Vittorio," she answered, "I am no more prisoner now than in times past, for ever Gaspar held me close. And I am well content, since there is promise at the end of going out to full freedom, and that not alone."

There was that in the words at which Benedetto smiled, and as the two walked away together he tapped Jacobo on the arm.

"I begin to think my lord was no such fool when he broke his journey to Savona to win this castle," he said. "The two look well together."

"Let us tap a barrel of that wine from the cellars, and drink their healths while our throats are still uncut," Jacobo suggested.

"A wise measure," Benedetto agreed. "So it be a full measure of wine, wise enough," said Jacobo.

WHILE, within the castle, these things chanced, away among the pines at the far side of the plateau, near by the broken bridge where the track wound down from the hills to Sercona hamlet, Gaspar sat among his men. Of the two hundred whom once he had called followers, less than a hundred were left, and, of this band who sat about their chief, there were very few who looked other than gloomy. Under Gaspar's lead they had fleeced and harried this country about Sercona for so long that every man of them was marked and known by honest folk as one deserving of instant hanging on

capture; the sense of security that came of sitting behind strong walls had gone from them, and—more immediate cause for thought—they had lost stores and provisions in losing the castle, and must forage for themselves from meal to meal.

Andrea returned. He and Cesar alone had ever been the two who dared face Gaspar and speak freely, and now, facing his chief, he gave Vittorio's message as it had been given him, caring nothing for Gaspar's growling rage. The giant Count went deadly quiet when all the message had been given, as was his way when most wrathful.

"He will not trust our word, eh?" he asked.

"Why should he?" Andrea asked, indifferently. "Is the name of Count Gaspar one that will inspire trust in other men?"

Gaspar glared momentarily at the gibe, but realized its truth and laughed softly. "Aye, why should he?" he asked. "Andrea, there is a wit in that ugly head of thine that drives thee to white truth, at times, though it sits ill on such a one to be truthful."

"Lord Count," said Andrea, "we be all great liars together."

"For that," Gaspar rumbled, "I have a mind to make blue weals on that fine skin of thine, my page. Yet it must wait till we are safely ensconced once more within our castle walls. And for that there is but one way—one means."

"**S**AY ON, lord," Andrea bade, while the men of the band gathered close to listen what their master would propose.

"I must fight this Vittorio," Gaspar announced. "Let us wait through this day, to see if he will risk a sally of his men, and then I will go up and chal-

lenge him to come forth. Andrea, your voice shall shout the challenge before the castle gate, that all his men may hear, and then if he will not come forth to fight, he shall be reckoned coward and recreant, a figure of scorn to his own men. That you shall shout as part of the challenge."

"I have seen this Vittorio fight," Andrea mused aloud.

"I have felt it," Gaspar agreed. "'Twill be a struggle, even for me, to make certain of his death, but look you—'tis but a bare quarter mile from the cover here to the near end of the drawbridge. Let me but get him out fighting in the open with the drawbridge down, and then you shall lead these men in an attack on the bridge, which must be lowered to admit of his crossing to fight me. Before he can retreat, enough of you will have passed over to retake the castle for us, and then we hold the whole crew of these robbers at our mercy."

"It is well," Andrea commented. "At dawn I will take the challenge, and by noon we will sit behind our own walls again."

So they planned. But later, when Andrea had gone to eat with the men and Gaspar sat alone, the big Count brooded uneasily. Since Vittorio had come up against him, he had lost the utter confidence of old time, in which he had taken tribute of the countryside as and when he would; in all their encounters, Vittorio had won—not once had Gaspar had cause to congratulate himself.

If that series of encounters were augury for this last fight, by which alone the castle could be won back, then it might well be that the castle would not be won, after all. Count Gaspar shook himself as if to shake away these

forebodings, called for a flask of the wine that his men had hunted out from Sercona, and drank, and slept. The afternoon grew old, the shadow of the castle came out across the swarded level toward where its former holders lay among the pines, and Gaspar's men talked among themselves of how they would rush the little band and regain their hold while their master overthrew this Vittorio who had wrought so much evil among them.

THAT evening Vittorio climbed the stairway of the great central tower, coming out on the flat roof to see how the land fell away to the south, down to the level beyond Sercona where went the road that he would travel—the road from which he had turned aside for this venture that had begun so lightly, and had developed to such earnest because of the light in a girl's eyes. He saw, too, how that girl leaned on the parapet at the far side of the tower, alone and dreaming, and stepping softly he crossed the level to her side. When she turned and looked at him with the eyes that had drawn him from his journey to this quest, he knew that it had been a good thing to brave Gaspar, win this place, and so set himself beside her.

He pointed down toward the plain, and the road that wound away to Savona.

"See," he said, "where we shall go, when all these things are finished. I will prison you and carry you, Ginevra—"

"No need for prisoning," she answered with a smile. "I think I have waited all my life for the promise of this day. Yet there is a task to accomplish—the way is barred to us."

"For a little while," he said. "You shall see how, if we but wait, Gaspar's

men will melt away from him, leaving him alone and fearful. Then he too will give up guarding the way, and when our strength is equal I will go out, hunt him down for the black murderer that he is, and make end of him."

"So," she said musingly. "And then will this corner of the hills know peace. If you could see the horrors I have seen—"

"I know," he told her. "But they have ended—they ended when we took this place."

"What of the men here—the few who were left when your men stormed in—what shall be done with them?" she asked.

"All save one have been sent out to Gaspar," he answered. "Cesar the Black remains—he is too black, and will be hanged from this tower at dawn."

"A just fate," she said—yet shivered a little at the thought. "Cesar has killed many, tortured many—"

Suddenly she pointed out and down, across to where the pines clustered. At the edge of their darkness stood a great figure of a man, who raised and shook a naked blade that glimmered in the sun's last light. He cried out at the two figures standing side by side on the tower's top, but the distance was too great for them to distinguish the words. Vittorio smiled.

"The Count is angry, it seems," he said. He passed his arm round Ginevra's waist, and she leaned against him, looking up into his eyes with perfect trust, happily.

"Let us go," he said. "In a little time, now, we will go on to Savona, and there I will call you wife, Ginevra."

In full view of Gaspar, raging and shaking his blade, he took her in his arms and kissed her before they went back toward the stair.



In full view of Gaspar, raging and shaking his blade, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

CESAR the Black swung down over the great gateway, a ghastly pendulum, as the first rays of the risen sun struck on the stone; he had stabbed his last victim, and now tasted of the fate he had meted out to many—it was, as Ginevra had said, a just punishment, for Cesar had been black of heart as of beard. Looking up at him from the edge of the fosse, with rage in his heart and the white flag of truce on a spear-shaft in his hand, stood Andrea again, bidding the man who kept guard send for Vittorio della Porta. And, after a time, Vittorio came to stand by the windlass of the drawbridge and hear what Gaspar now proposed.

“A word from my master, Count Gaspar,” said Andrea composedly. “At the hour of noon he will meet you, Vittorio della Porta, here in the open, on foot, to do battle for this castle which is his and which you hold.”

Vittorio smiled. “And why, think you, should I come forth at Gaspar’s will, to decide a thing that is already decided?” he asked.

Andrea shrugged. “So might a coward speak,” he suggested, “but so far my master has had no need to count you a coward, Vittorio della Porta. If you would shelter behind his walls, then so be it, but from Milan to Savona it shall be known that you feared to defend in fair fight that which you had stolen by foul scheming. Take up the challenge, or stand branded in the sight of your fellows and your followers.”

“Tell Count Gaspar,” Vittorio answered slowly, “that he shall come alone and unattended, armed with what harness he may choose, and bearing rapier and dagger, and I will meet him here and do battle with him. But if one man of his come with him, then I will not come out—it shall be between us

two alone, here at the drawbridge end.”

“Let it be a hundred paces from the drawbridge end,” Andrea amended, “else it will be possible for men of yours to rush out and overpower my master before we his followers can effect a rescue.”

“One hundred paces it shall be,” Vittorio agreed, “with rapier and dagger, at the hour of noon.”

“That,” said Andrea, “or else my master’s first offer still holds. You and all yours may go out, leaving the lady Ginevra unharmed.”

“At the hour of noon, with rapier and dagger,” Vittorio repeated. “This honor will I give to the robber you call master, but as for that offer of his, I would as soon trust a viper to hold back from striking when its prey is near. Go back—bear that for answer.”

So Andrea went back to the hollow among the pines where Gaspar and his men lay, and Vittorio passed back into the great hall of the castle, to acquaint Benedetto and Ginevra with what had passed, the challenge given and accepted. Benedetto shook his head gravely.

“It was the only answer, lord,” he agreed, “yet I like it little. It is a fight of a greyhound against a bull, and if you fall—”

“I shall not fall,” Vittorio said calmly. “This is the end, made more speedy than we had hoped. Gaspar comes to his doom, and so saves us the work of executing him.”

“So be it,” Benedetto prayed.

But Ginevra went close to the man she had learned to love, and looked into his face; she spoke no word, only looked up at him until he took her in his arms and held her close.

“Have no fear, dear one,” he bade. “This is the last trial, and then we will set out for Savona and happiness.”

HE signed to Pietro to approach. "Take barrels of the powder stored for use with the culverins," he ordered. "Jacobo here will show you how it should be laid, and you two must build two mines, one under this great tower and one under the southern tower, laying a train of powder that may be carried out to the gateway when all is ready."

Pietro stared. "Lord, would you destroy the castle?" he asked.

"It shall be destroyed," Vittorio answered, "for that way only can there be peace in these hills. While this castle remains, it will tempt such brigands as Gaspar to set up a place of fear—so it must be destroyed when we go out. See to it, you two."

The order was inflexible, and reluctantly Pietro turned to obey. But there was no reluctance about Jacobo; he went merrily to the task, bade Pietro show him where the powder casks were stored, and trundled them to the places that he chose with care.

"Enough here, Pietro, to plant this castle among the stars," he remarked. "Let us call a halt, ever and again, to try if that other sort of cask that we know of be still in good order. The one thing that grieves me is that Gaspar's store of wine must go up with the stones, for in wine the Count had a fine taste."

But Pietro, differently minded, mourned as he worked, yet worked as bidden. For there was that about Vittorio della Porta which men obeyed without much questioning.

So they came to the hour of noon, and by that time there were two great heaps of the powder packed in, one under the southern tower and one beneath the great gateway of the castle, where it would blow up and shatter the main

tower. Then Vittorio, armed with rapier and dagger, kissed Ginevra and put her gently back from him; he went out to the guardhouse, where Jacobo, his task of mining the towers done, stood with his great bow ready strung, and his hand on the windlass of the drawbridge. In his quiver was a stock of the long shafts that Gaspar's men had learned to fear.

Then out from the cover of the pines stalked the Count, across the open of the plateau, and Vittorio bade the archer let down the bridge. Before its farther end had settled to rest he was out on it, and he stepped the hundred paces that the Count had asked, to halt, rapier in hand, and await Gaspar's approach. Beside the great bulk of his enemy he looked but a slender boy, and back in the gateway of the castle Ginevra, standing to watch, feared for him and prayed wordlessly.

Quietly Gaspar came; he spoke no word, but bowed formally, and placed himself on guard. He had no doubt of the outcome, and as Vittorio came to the attack he smiled, in utter confidence. He had but to hold off his opponent till they were fairly engaged, and then the rush of his men from among the pines would shatter Vittorio's confidence, enable him to deliver the thrust that should make an end of this boy who had dared to set himself against the terror of these hills. It would not last long, Gaspar knew—

So he fenced warily, easily, waiting for the rush that should come with a certain stamp of his foot. Yet a minute had not passed before he found that it would be none too easy to make that stamp with comfort. Andrea would be watching for it, and his men on a surge to rush the lowered drawbridge, which would not be drawn up until Vittorio

had had time to cross. Then Gaspar, feeling a slight prick of steel at his left shoulder, forgot all about the stamp.

HE KNEW, as a fencer will suddenly know, that whether he stamped or not it was all one to him. This Vittorio della Porta had a wrist of steel and a flicker of lightning for a blade; he was playing easily, as with a foil, and had Gaspar at his mercy. He could kill when he would. Gaspar might stamp to summon his men, but he would be no longer alive when they reached him.

The conviction of this flurried him; he drove in on Vittorio, guarding instinctively, forcing the fight in the hope that some chance might leave him an opening. But Vittorio slid away easily from every attack, turned and twisted Gaspar's blade where he would have it, and smiled at the rageful face that reddened with angry fear. Then Gaspar made shift to stamp as he had planned.

Andrea, watching for that signal, raised a cry, and Gaspar's men poured out to the open. Then Vittorio's smile hardened to grimness. "It is the end, Gaspar," he said.

On the word Gaspar went down with the rapier blade cleanly through his heart, an easy death by comparison with that to which he had doomed so many in his time. Andrea saw him fall, and it was his last sight, for the first of Jacobo's arrows found him as Vittorio's blade had found his master, and he pitched down on his face at the edge of the thicket and lay still. And fast the long shafts flew, every one a death, for the rush was well in range for the gaunt archer by the bridge. Until as Vittorio turned and ran lightly toward the draw-bridge there lay a dozen or more of the attackers out on the sward, and at the bridge end Vittorio turned to look,

watching how they clustered round the body of the dead Count, leaderless, helpless. He raised his hand to Jacobo as a signal that he should cease to shoot.

"Go back into the castle," he bade, "and bring out the train of powder to the gate, and on across the bridge. Send out Benedetto to stand here with me, to hold the way in case they think of attack. Marshal all our men, and bid them march forth with all they would carry, to join us here. And tell the lady Ginevra that I wait to take her on to our marriage in Savona. And, lastly, bring out a lighted torch, that we may fire the train of powder and make end of Gaspar's castle."

"So be it, lord," Jacobo answered.

Vittorio stood watching, but Gaspar's followers made no move to attack further. For a while they clustered round the body of the dead Count and then, irresolutely, they straggled away.

There came forth Benedetto, with a grin on his face, to stand beside his master. Then marched out the little band who had held to this one man against the might of Gaspar the terrible, and Benedetto laughed.

"Easy victory, lord," he said. "Wit against brawn, ever an easy victory."

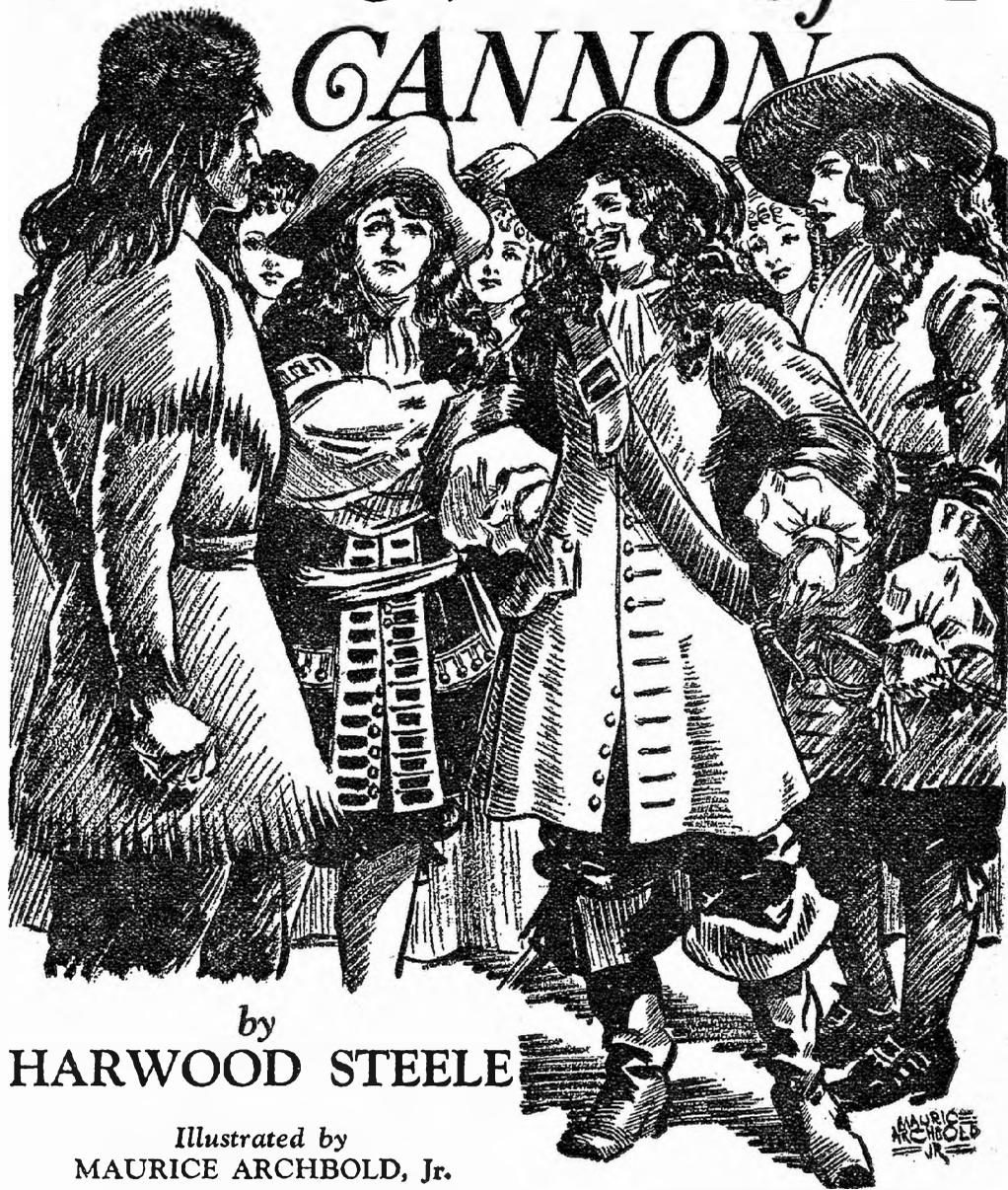
But Vittorio remembered how he had lain bound in Gaspar's dungeon, with but a pace, it seemed, between him and death by torture.

"Easy," he said, "easy and swift."

He saw Jacobo trailing out a black line of powder from the great gateway of the castle, slowly and carefully, that both mines might be surely fired. Then he saw Ginevra, who came fully attired for the journey to Savona—came shyly, as a bride might come, until she looked into his eyes.

Before them all he took her in his arms and kissed her.

In The Mouth Of A CANNON



by
HARWOOD STEELE

Illustrated by
MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.

CERTAIN fierce yearnings ablaze in their breasts like a forest fire, Michel de Nicolet, Sieur de Bellemagny, and his fellow *coureurs de bois* came down the Ottawa, madly plying their flashing paddles, driving their

great birchbark canoe like an arrow towards Ville Marie.

It was spring, when even the ants and the skunks turn to mating. Michel

"Know from me that you are Sieur de Bellemagny no longer."

de Nicolet, Sieur de Bellemagny, was only twenty-four. Like most of these other young scalawags, Michel had spent the last three years—in stark defiance of the orders of the Governor—far, far away from the fair dames of Canada, bartering for furs with beads and brandy among the Nipissings and Ojibways, the Salteaux and Muskegons of the North-West, and, incidentally, conquering a continent, carelessly overrunning that brave New World. There had been furs aplenty, the deep-laden canoe was full of them, all worth their weight in gold in Paris, or even at the great fur fair of Ville Marie. Also there had been women aplenty, but savages, look you, squaws! In all those three years, Michel had not seen a white girl.

And, after all, deep calls to deep. What a man must play with, now and then, was, not a broad-backed, rough-handed, silent smoky Indian, but a girl of his own race, pink and white, laughing and luscious and warm.

Well, there were plenty such in Ville Marie, all eagerly waiting for bully boys like these. Once the furs were sold and the profits shared, every lost soul of them could have girls by regiments! True, the spoilsport missionaries at the outposts said the Governor was hanging all the *coureurs de bois* (he wanted the whole damned fur trade for the King—and his favorites.) Therefore, to set one's foot in Ville Marie was to poke one's nose into the cannon's mouth. But, thunder of Judas, what of that? Governor or no Governor, those furs would be sold, those fillettes bought! For every prize in the world worth winning lurks in the mouth of a cannon!

So they plied their paddles till the sweat poured down their naked backs,

they sang and laughed like fiends, at thought of the pleasures to come, they made the thick dark forest ring with the terrible Iroquois war-whoop.

MICHEL did not paddle; their captain, he had something else to do. But he laughed, as the wanton wind fluttered his long hair, kissed his handsome, reckless sun-blackened face, and he planned, planned his Ville Marie campaign. Should he do like the rest and start with some black-eyed, buxom, tavern wench—some Paulette, Mignon, Madelyne or Angelique? No, this bold, bad boy was after higher game: Christine de Plaisance, perhaps, whose father, the Intendant's right-hand man, was as great in the Colony, almost, as the Governor himself, or Adelaide de Pabos (the most beautiful girl in five fiefs), or Madame de Degele, Madame de Jolicoeur, Madame de Seize Iles (Michel had liked her husband), Madame de Chateau de Ste. Angele—

Three years since he had seen them. But they would not have forgotten him!

He portaged into the St. Lawrence and came at noon to Ville Marie, crouching within its ring of wooden forts, under Mount Royal. The strand was already thick with canoes, every street running with brandy, riotous with revelry. All the *coureurs de bois*, all the top-knotted, scalp-hunting Indians in New France, must be there, shouting and brawling, drinking and gambling!

"Way for the Sieur de Bellemagny! Way there, make way!"

Michel and his canoeload of fanfarons fought their way to the fur market.

"Who are you shoving?" yelled some one.

And the Heavens quivered, turned three somersaults, burst open and fell.

A gloved fist struck Michel in the face. Words beat about his head like the wings of eagles:

"Back there, you cockatrice, you scavenger, you gallows-bird *coureur de bois!* Beware how you lay your filthy paws on a gentleman of France!"

Ten hundred thousand devils! Livid, dreadful fury consumed Michel. Then—pan!—a ring cleared, a jostling, howling ring of savages, *coureurs de bois*, bourgeoisie, sailormen, soldiers and amourettes, to leave Michel facing his enemy.

For five, no six, tremendous seconds, the pride of a coat-of-arms crammed with quarterings and slashed by two bars sinister of the blood royal furiously urged Michel to spring bare-handed at the other's throat. But he recovered himself, icily inspected the scented curls, plumed hat, satin and ribbons confronting him. His white teeth flashed, he bowed to the very ground.

"And who," said he, "has usurped the honor of addressing Michel de Nicolet, Sieur de Bellemagny?"

"Fiend alone knows whether your blood is as good as you claim! If this is falsehood, cockahoop, I shall certainly have you flogged! Meanwhile, Monsieur, pray mark that I am Captain de Morigneau de Roberval de Fortunat de Ste. Scholastique, Chevalier of St. Louis, and of the King's Carignan Regiment—"

"Fresh, no doubt, from leading some lady into her bath in the King's new play-box at Versailles?"

"Fresh, fellow—" the captain was trembling with passion, for the crowd was laughing—"from chastising the savages whom you rogues have made blood-brothers!"

"And I, from winning an Empire, Monsieur, for France!" Suddenly Michel ceased to laugh. Three times he struck the chevalier's contemptuous and haughty countenance. "By all the fiends and saints, my popinjay, will you fight?"

"You have no sword—"

"You lie!"

And lie he did. With one swoop, Michel had whipped the sword out of the scabbard of the nearest gentleman-at-arms.

"On guard, then—"

THE yell of the blood-mad crowd drowned the first swift clash of steel; and the yelling sank, in turn, under a new, more menacing sound, a stunning thunder of drums, announcing the Iron Man himself, the Governor.

Michel was doomed. Who could have guessed that the Governor was in town, when he should have been in his capital, Quebec? Much less, that he would catch one of these outlawed *coureurs de bois*, sword drawn, indulging in an absolutely forbidden brawl with, of all things, an officer of the Governor's most famous and favored regiment?

But Michel stood fast—never a Nicolet yet had shown the tip of his tail to man or devil! The crowd melted away in terror: Not Michel!

Straight as a pike he stood, this gamecock, to face the Governor. And the Governor, fierce, gigantic, surrounded with an awe-inspiring retinue of gentlemen and halberdiers, looked at him as he might have looked on the most utterly damned of Iroquois.

The others glared too, every man Jack, of course, taking his cue from Master. There were, though, as Michel now saw, some eyes that did not

glare—eyes bright and lovely, the eyes of a score of ladies also in the train of the Governor.

Under the very shadow of destruction, Michel smiled back at these beauties. Turn-spits of Heaven! Were not these the darlings he had come one thousand leagues to see? Why, some were old sweethearts of his—Denise de Trois Pistoles, Marguerite de Ste. Nazaire, Madame de Ranchicourt.

Said the Governor, in a voice like growling batteries:

“Who is this man?”

“He claims, Monsieur—” said Michel’s enemy.

“Nay, Monsieur le Gouverneur, he is Michel de Nicolet, Sieur de Bellemagny, at your service!”

“Is this true?”

A sweet piping, as of so many song-birds—never had Michel heard such music!—came from the charming flock behind the Governor.

“Monsieur, it is true!”

Faith, Michel might well have known they never would fail him!

He swept the ladies a bow that was truly superb.

“Then, Monsieur, since I cannot doubt such witnesses,” the lips of the Governor curled in a terrible smile, “know from me that you are Sieur de Bellemagny no longer, since, for the past two years, as punishment for your rascality as a *coureur de bois*, your title and estates have been forfeit to His Majesty!”

The blow was devastating—though hardly unexpected.

Michel bowed again, splendidly.

“As you will, Monsieur!”

A little murmur swept through the Governor’s retinue, and something like a feminine sob.

Garters of Venus, this was a man!

But the Governor had not yet finished.

“Now, for daring to draw sword on an officer of mine—take him away, halberdiers, and hang him, forthwith!”

The grim guards closed in, only to be thrust aside, as a new voice cried sharply:

“Uncle, you must not! I forbid it!”

HE came, not from behind the Governor, but from somewhere in the shrinking, distant crowd, such a vision of maidenly beauty as even Michel had never before clapped eyes on—red-haired and rosy, gorgeous in white satin, fresh and slender and, say, sixteen—an angel, dropped from Heaven, to save him!

The Governor might have swallowed this wisp of a thing at one gulp. But she faced him, the man whose mere glance made the bravest chiefs crawl on their bellies, like a King’s Musket-
eer.

Said the Governor, barely controlling his fury:

“Linette, what are you doing here? In this cess-pool?”

“Taking the air, my Governor—like you!”

“Impudent school-miss, I shall clap you back into a cloistered nunnery! I shall have you whipped! How dare you meddle with the King’s affairs?”

“To save an innocent man!”

“Innocent?”

“But certainly! This gentleman did not start the rumpus, and was unarmed. Your captain struck the first blow, struck him in the face. I was passing! I saw it!”

The Governor turned.

“Captain de Ste. Scholastique, on your honor, is this true?”

The Captain shuffled, swallowed, gasped:

"It is true!"

Linette smiled triumphantly. And the Governor wheeled slowly on Michel.

"I care not! I have long sworn to make an example. Take him away and hang him! Quick march!"

"Uncle, you cannot! I beseech you! Do anything you will with me, send me back to the convent, beat me, put me on bread and water, but do not unjustly condemn so gallant a gentleman to death!"

Imp and Cherubims! She was on her knees, that lovely one, on her dear little knees in the filth of the market, ruining her satins and pleading his cause!

For a whole breathless minute, the Governor glared down on her. Then:

"Stand up, you numbskull, and join the ladies! As for you, Sieur de Lacklands, my niece has saved your life! Get back to your wilderness, take your tattertails out of Ville Marie by midnight tonight—and keep your claws hereafter off His Majesty's furs—or tomorrow I shall change my mind!"

"Long live the Governor!"

The cheer burst involuntarily from his retinue, and was silenced at once by a look that would have slain Gorgons. The drums rolled. The crowd rushed back into tumultuous life. The Governor moved on.

But Linette did not move. She still lingered while Michel bent the knee before her, seized her hand.

"Incredible lady, how can I thank you?"

She smiled on him, a smile that sprinkled his entire heart with violets—

"Not here, Monsieur. I must follow my uncle."

"Where, then, before I die of suspense? Where, Mademoiselle, and when?"

"My window, Sieur de Bellemagny, is third from the left at the back of the chateau. You may easily scale the wall, I have done so. My maid is always gone by ten o'clock."

THE furs soon sold, the profits soon divided, Michel's malaperts plunged headfirst into the seas of their desires. But not Michel! He pushed away the astounded Paulettes and Mignons; he even pushed away the wine, while for an hour he sat in the *Dancing Swine* planning and savoring the sweet, sweet vengeance he meant to take on the Governor who had filched his title and estates.

At nine the moon came up, over the Hôtel Dieu, the parish church and the fantastic gables of Ville Marie, and Michel came out—but a new Michel, who had spent his money to some purpose. Gone was the rakehell *coureur de bois* and in his place was a courtier, brilliant as a maple tree in Indian summer, fit to hand Louis himself his breeches or the Queen her gloves.

He was, of course, too early. The next hour seemed a year. At ten, he stood in deep shadow under that certain wall. The cool air was intoxicating with the rich scent of flowers, a nightingale trilled somewhere in the mysterious heart of the garden—and a light twinkled invitingly through the trees. He sprang over the wall like a squirrel, slipped swiftly and silently towards that beckoning light.

Third from the left—correct! Gently he called:

"Linette!"

The candle went out, a dim white form appeared at the open casement.

"Mon amour—" she whispered.

Almost it seemed as if she drew him over the moonlight dappled sill.

Aye, and into the cannon's mouth where grow life's loveliest roses. The aches and pains of three years' bitter toil on far-off trails were forgotten in her first warm, silky embrace, her first ardent kiss.

All in good time, he came, at last, to his vengeance on the Governor.

"Listen, cherie,"—his eager words tumbled over her like rapids—"your uncle has ordered me to show my heels by midnight under pain of death. Not all the Governors in Christendom could drive my men out of the arms of their sweethearts tonight, for, dog's bones, they have only just got here. But I have gathered me a fresh crew who are willing to go, having spent all their money. Come with me back to the wilderness, where the *Sieur de Lacklands* has lands enough for three Empires! By the toes of Diana, you are the bravest woman that ever saved man's life! You have the courage to face the Iroquois! And you say that you are sick of all this?"

"My adorable outlaw, I would go with you to the end of the world!"

"Then come, now!"

"Wait for me by the wall. I shall be ready in ten minutes."

He waited, burning with impatience, laughing silently with ecstasy. This was vengeance with a vengeance—to whisk away to the camps of the detested *coureurs de bois* the Governor's own niece!

SHE came, close wrapped in a long cloak, lest some one recognize her and interfere. He took her hand and together they raced through the black streets, empty now but for the watch and, occasionally, a tipsy *voyageur* or

Indian. There by the long wharf his canoe waited, his men already with their paddles in the sparkling water. He helped her in, slid in beside her.

"Shove off, there! Give way!"

Then, eager for her lips, he turned—sat thunderstruck—

The face that smiled so sweetly into his was beautiful. But it was the face of Madame de Ranchicourt, first of all his sweethearts, she who had taught him Love's secrets in the dark woods of Bellemagny, long ago; and long ago married an aspiring and conspiring numps.

He ripped out an oath straight from the ash-pits of Hell. And:

"Tricked!" he shouted! "The damned red-headed vixen, she has made a fool of me—and robbed me of my revenge!"

"Not at all, *Sieur de Lacklands*! It is my doing, not hers! I—happened—to see you come into the garden. I—happened—to hear you billing and cooing, for her room is next to mine. I—happened—to put an ear to the key-hole and overhear your plan. The door was unlocked. I was on her before she could squeak; the bed-hangings made excellent bindings, an excellent gag. She fought, I assure you, she fought; but I am stronger than she, and I have not waited three years for you to be robbed by a school-brat scarce weaned."

He stared at her. He had forgotten that she was so fair and bold. And certainly she made love, once, very nicely.

"But, thunder of tom-toms! my revenge, wench, my revenge!"

"Is it not sweeter, even, than stealing the Governor's niece, to steal his—mistress?"

"By Satan!"

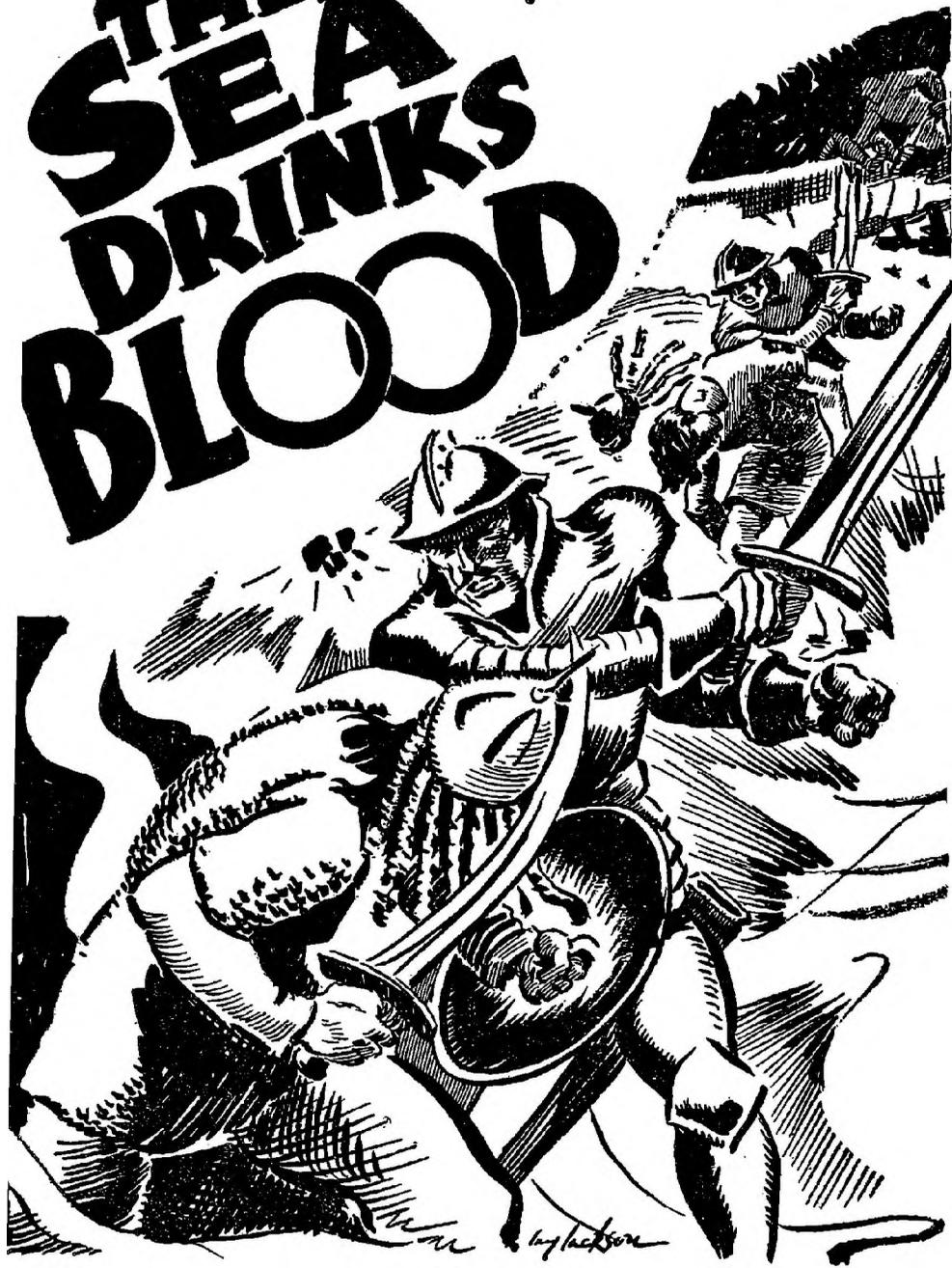
Michel laughed, very quietly.

"Paddle on, my rips! Paddle on!"

"Come with me back to the wilderness,
where the Sieur de Lacklands has lands
enough for three Empires."



THE SEA DRINKS BLOOD



by H. BEDFORD-JONES



While ever came aboard
swarms of men who
yelled to Allah and died.

Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

THE bright autumn sunlight of India filled the gardens where they stood. Her women, all astare, clustered and looked on; Rajput women, bright with jewels and saffron robes, mark of the Rajput; dark women but no darker than she, or the dark, handsome man in morion and breastplate who talked with her in Arabic.

A very eager man, alive with youth and energy, who had earned spurs and arms in fighting the Moors at home, and now stood face to face with destiny on the shores of India. He had known it from their first meeting, the day the fleet arrived here in Chaul, whose name would linger in the bright

woven shawls of India. He knew it now as he talked with her, whose father governed Chaul for the Grand Mogul, and he fumbled for her name. He could get only part of it—Nur. Light! It was a name that fitted her slim bright loveliness, and he repeated it while she laughed at his harshly accented words.

"Nur! Nur! Most beautiful of all women!" he exclaimed, lifting her slender fingers to his lips. "I, Carlos de Suarez, swear you fealty with all my heart, with all my life!"

Her dark liquid eyes, her exquisite features, answered his words, his look, his touch. Pride of Rajput blood, more regal than his own, flash of jewels, tenderness and quick hot breath, parted lips—all answered him, like her voice.

"Suarez!" she murmured. "Suarez!"

He caught sight of flashing mail; one of her father's warriors, stately and bearded, agleam with gold and steel.

"Quickly!" he breathed. "When can I see you alone? When?"

"Tonight at moonrise. Here, by the fountain."

THE warrior appeared, saluted them, and summoned Suarez. He was needed at once, for he spoke Arabic and was the interpreter on whom the young admiral chiefly relied.

So he went back to the hall of audience, to meet with significant grins from the other captains, and a laughing greeting from the admiral; his passion was no secret. The open side of the hall overlooked the river and the shallow lagoons inside the island, where the ships lay; the hot sunlight was tempered by the cool monsoon breeze, and to European eyes all the scene was strange and wonderful.

Eight of them in all, grizzled hardy captains, except Suarez and the admiral.

Lorenzo d'Almeida was Admiral of the Indies and his father was Viceroy south at Goa, but despite his youth he deserved the rank he held. He was filled with a high and lofty nobility like the knights of old, and had made his three big ships and five little caravels the terror of the Moslems in these seas. For this was the year 1508, and never before had European ships sailed these waters to the northwest of India.

The eight captains were guests here in the palace, the Portuguese and the Grand Mogul being in peace and friendship. Suarez, who captained one of the caravels, sat with Almeida and the stately Rajput governor, who was almost as white as themselves in skin; all around were guards and nobles, darker in hue and very brilliant with jewels. The coat of the governor sparkled with diamonds, and his jeweled aigret was fastened with a ruby that made the visitors gasp.

As Suarez handled the talk of commerce and trade stations, he paid scant heed to it, for his mind was filled with the flashing eyes of the girl he had left. Nur—Light of the World, Light of the Harem, Light of something-or-other. No matter. Nur was enough; this was all the name he needed for her. And she would meet him at moonrise! She was under scant restrictions, for the Rajput women did as they liked and lived their own lives, unlike the Hindus they ruled.

"Our fleet has sailed for home, but will be back in the spring," said Almeida. "Tell him we want to open a station here, when it comes."

"For centuries," replied the Rajput, "all the trade of this coast has been in the hands of Arabs. The Sultan of Egypt sends fleets to the King of Gujerat, north of here. Indeed, I hear

that the sultan has built a mighty fleet of heavy ships, modeled on the greatest ships of the Mediterranean, and that Gujerat has built a second fleet, and that these mean to sweep all Christians from these seas."

Almeida laughed when he heard this. The threat from Egypt had been rumored a long time and had not come true.

"Let these Moslem dogs think twice before they tempt Portuguese cannon!" said he. "We have the favor of the Grand Mogul, and we can hold our own at sea."

So he said, being skilled in sea lore and confident in his pride, but the Rajput was slow to promise. These Portuguese ships floating in the shallow harbor were but eight, and report said ten times that number of great ships, specially built of Dalmatian oak and manned with the trained warriors of Egypt, were on the way.

The discussion dragged and got nowhere, being adjourned to the next day. Almeida was furious, but could not help himself.

"Tell him, then," he ordered Suarez, "that our eight little ships here are able to uphold the honor of Portugal against all Egypt, and sooner or later he'll have proof of it. And invite him to a reception aboard the fleet tomorrow."

The governor accepted promptly. Like all Rajputs, he had the keenest admiration for fighting men, and there was no denying that these strapping, bronzed, hardy Portuguese could fight. So could the Mamelukes of Egypt, however, and they were famed to be the greatest warriors on earth. And Egypt claimed the trade of western India.

FOR the afternoon, elephants were called up and the governor took his

guests to watch games outside the city, and shooting with guns and bows, and play with sword and scimitar; with evening, he was holding a feast on the palace terraces. Suarez and the admiral occupied the howdah of one elephant together, and as the great beast padded along behind that of the governor, Almeida spoke his mind.

"Look you, Carlos! What's in your mind regarding the daughter of the governor?"

"What should be?" returned Suarez. "She's the loveliest lady ever seen."

"Bah! Women are cheap in this land," the young admiral said. "And you command a caravel for Portugal, my friend. Would you endanger our alliance here by luring this lady into a love affair? If you'd seek a woman, go buy yourself a slave."

The hot eyes of Suarez flashed. "Senhor admiral, you mistake. This lady is of very high blood and no light o' love. I would win her for my wife; whether she come with me to Lisbon, or I stay here in India, matters not to me. In short, I love her."

"Aye?" Almeida, who was no less swift to anger, flushed. "It is in my mind to forbid you to go farther in this matter."

"It's in my mind that you'd better not," snapped Suarez.

"By St. Jago! Dare me, do you? Then tomorrow, after we receive these nobles aboard the fleet, report to my ship under arrest; your lieutenant can command the *San Carlos*. Until then, act as usual, for we do not want these heathen to be aware of dissension among us. Either you obey me, or you can go to the Viceroy in chains."

"Perhaps I'll do neither one," Suarez said hotly, laying hand on sword.

Dom Lorenzo, who could give any

man fire for fire, flew into fury. One word led to another. Suarez, tormented by the thought of liquid dark eyes and moonrise, suddenly flicked his fingers across Almeida's cheek.

"That for the loveliest lady on this earth!" he said, clinging to the side of the lurching howdah. "Answer like a man and a knight, if you dare!"

They were two young men; but they were also admiral and captain. Almeida drew back, white to the lips, and controlled himself.

"Now you have indeed gone too far, Dom Carlos," said he bitterly. "The Admiral of the Indies doesn't measure rapiers with one of his captains. Let this pass for the moment, and tomorrow night I'll send you back to the Viceroy. Answer to him."

With this, Suarez knew that he was a lost man. Stern old Almeida pardoned no man, dealt out no mercy; for a captain to strike his admiral, meant short shrift and quick doom. And there was no more to be said.

Chains and a scaffold? Devil take the lot of them!

They came to the place of the games, and each elephant discharged its load at the platform beneath the awning of striped silks. Suarez, mingling with the others, hot-eyed and hot of heart, was singled out by the governor's son, a handsome warrior clad in jeweled mail; because he alone could speak Arabic, he was taken by Ruksha to meet other warriors and nobles. These, as it chanced, made fun among themselves of the straight, heavy cutting rapier of Suarez, who gave them word for word and scorned their curved scimitars.

As Suarez well knew, the lady Nur was among the other women of the court, looking on.

Again, one word led to another, until Suarez offered to uphold the virtues of his Toledo blade against any swordsman in Chaul. At which, Ruksha laughed and clapped him on the arm.

"Taken, my friend!" cried the Rajput. "And my father shall decide, and your admiral! I'll get you a helmet like my own, to protect nose and cheeks and neck—"

Now there was instant trouble. Almeida came to Suarez and cursed him hotly.

"You fool! You must pick on the governor's own son for your quarrel!"

"It's no quarrel," snapped Suarez. "We're friends; I love his sister and he knows it. It's the Rajput way; it's a very honorable and knightly bout, with no harm done."

"It's damned folly!" said the admiral. "I'll forbid it!"

"You're good at that," Suarez sneered. "And shame the arms of Portugal before all these Rajput knights and nobles?"

This silenced Almeida's objections. "Have your way, then," said he, with a shrug. "One more charge to be entered against you when you stand trial."

"Boast of that when the trial comes," retorted Suarez, and swung away.

THE court and the massed throngs of soldiers and people watched eagerly as the two men stepped out. Suarez was given a helm with chain mail dangling about mouth and neck, like that of the Rajput; otherwise, it was breastplate against chain shirt, straight Toledo against scimitar, each man having a small Rajput shield in his left hand. The governor himself, delighted that his son was acting as champion, gave the word, and the steel clashed.



As Suarez well knew, the lady Nur was among the women of the court, looking on.

Roars of acclaim shook the sky as the scimitar beat Suarez to his knees. He cut swiftly under his shield, and Ruksha

leaped back; he was up again, meeting the Rajput's rush with thrust and parry, holding the scimitar at bay as it flamed before him, clashing it aside,

until the two of them were hoarse and panting, and the dust of their stamping feet rose about them in a cloud, and the fury of fight took full hold of them.

Twice the scimitar clashed full on the breastplate. Twice the straight blade hammered across the Rajput's helm, and split it. Part of Suarez' shield was sliced away. Each man was a master swordsman, and they were well matched.

Abruptly, came an unexpected end. In a furious clash, breast to breast, the scimitar snapped off close to the hilt. At the same instant, Suarez lost balance and fell, the rapier escaping from his hand. Ruksha flung himself forward as though to stab with the remnant of his shattered blade; instead, he caught the hand of Suarez, lifted him, and the two panting men embraced warmly, while delirious roars of applause lifted from the crowds. Knightly honor was far from dead in India.

Laughing, sobbing for breath, the two came and saluted the governor and admiral.

"He won!" cried out Ruksha, pointing to the Toledo blade.

"Nay, he won! I was down!" shouted Suarez. Applause welled up anew; even Almeida, for all his wrath, could not restrain frank admiration.

"Ye have both won!" proclaimed the stately governor. To Suarez he flung the jeweled aigret from his turban; to Ruksha, he passed his own gemmed scimitar. Then he insisted that the two ride back to the palace together.

Plaudits notwithstanding, Suarez well knew that once charges were preferred against him with the Viceroy, he was a lost man. And here he seized the chance given him, for as the elephant lurched on back to the city, he turned swiftly to the Rajput at his side.

"Ruksha! I have no choice but to leave my people and take service here, with you; it's either that, or give up the woman I love and be sent home in chains. Will you help me?"

Staggered for an instant by these words, the Rajput recovered.

"We are blood brethren, my friend, after today. I do not understand, but I accept your words. How can I help you?"

"Tomorrow morning, your father and the nobles come aboard the ships. When you leave, I must leave, or not at all. Come aboard my ship, you and your men, for certain parties are to visit each ship; demand that I return ashore with you, on some pretext. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" Ruksha, smiling, gripped his hand, and in these few words, all was understood and settled.

NOW it was arranged that Almeida and his captains should go aboard after the feast that evening, and that the governor should bring his nobles and officers to the ships next morning, three hours before noon. Parties were to visit each ship, and then all go with the captains to the admiral's ship, the *Royal Henry*. Suarez commanded the *San Carlos*, one of the five smaller caravels.

From the other captains, who suspected something amiss but as yet knew nothing definite about his savage quarrel with Almeida, Suarez received hearty back-slappings and much praise, as the feast opened at sunset. Nor did Almeida restrain a word of commendation for his sword-skill, though it was grimly said.

When the moon slid up into the sky, Suarez left the uproarious feast unobserved, and took his way to the foun-

Suarez kissed her fingers.
"Then it's all settled," he said.

tain in the palace gardens. There a slim dark shape awaited him, and amid the trees the plaintive voices of wood-doves echoed to the moon, as is their custom.

They talked awhile, and drew together, and upon a kiss Suarez won all his heart's desire, yet it saddened him in the winning. Unhappily, he made it plain that she, who deemed him a hero, found him facing disgrace and ruin and death, unless he left his own people and became an adventurer, seeking service with her father. She caught at him eagerly.

"I'm glad, I'm glad! He'll welcome you, for yourself and for love of me!"

Suarez kissed her fingers. "Then it's all settled," he said, and told of his agreement with Ruksha, leaving her to explain the whole matter to her brother. She trembled and clung against him.

"I'm glad," she said again. "Tonight a boat from the north came in. Her captain told us of seeing the Red Sea fleet in the Gujerat harbors, where the fleet of Gujerat also lies."

"What?" exclaimed Suarez. "The Egyptian fleet is really here?"

"It is here," she said, "and my heart was afraid for you. They are great galleys of oak, mighty ships that cannot be sunk; also, they are armed with huge bronze cannon, larger than yours,



and those ships are manned by the host of Egypt, all trained warriors. Added

to these is the innumerable fleet of Gujerat. When these ships sweep all Christians from the eastern seas, you'll be safe here with me, and I'm glad."

Suarez whistled, and was not wholly glad, as she was. However, he had no choice. Any captain who struck his admiral had only death to expect, not to mention lesser things. So as Nur was coming aboard with her brother on the morrow, he arranged all the business with her, and upon a kiss they parted at last.

NOW, the harbor lagoons here, which were shallow, were quite landlocked, only the river channel giving a slight view of the sea, but from the city and the hill, the whole expanse of the sea was visible.

With the first gleam of dawn, Suarez was up and had his men at work refurbishing the guns and making the decks clean. Some of them went ashore, with boats from the other ships, to fetch casks of fresh water, since the tide hereabouts tainted the river water.

In the first sunrise glow, those aboard the ships heard frantic shouts, and saw the men rushing for the boats and putting out at speed. Suarez, standing on the rail, perceived that the whole city seemed in a sudden uproar and confusion, with people running in the streets and signals being made. What had happened, neither he nor anyone else knew, until the boats came within call, and his own men shouted frantically to him.

"The enemy!" Their voices rose in wild accents. "The whole sea is covered with ships! Sails from the north, and great galleys rowing! Ships beyond count!"

The tidings were being shouted aboard the other vessels. So it was known that the Moslem host was come,

unexpectedly. They were caught beyond escape.

Almeida, when he had verified this, stood in his rigging with a speaking trumpet, and called to his captains.

"For an hour or so we have the wind offshore. Follow me, obey my signals; we'll make out into the river mouth, anchor there, and hold them off with our cannon. Inside the mouth of the river—watch signals!"

Sound strategy, as Suarez realized instantly. With the broadsides of Portugal to bar the way, up within the river where only a few ships at a time could come against them, it would go hard with the Moslem host. For as yet, he nor anyone else comprehended that these Red Sea ships, built on the models of the greatest galleys of Venice and Constantinople, manned and armed with the finest warriors and most modern weapons, formed the greatest armada that the eastern oceans had ever seen, or would see again. The Emir Hussein of Egypt was their admiral; and behind him came the Emir Melik of Gujerat, with a yet more numerous fleet of lighter vessels, long fighting proas. The Moslem had come to sweep Christian ships out of the east, now and forever.

THE anchors were upped. Almeida's ship, the *Royal Henry*, took the lead, and the others fell in line, shaking out enough canvas to gain headway. Suarez caught a shout from overside, and looked down to see a boat there, with two mailed and armed figures in it. He recognized Ruksha, and was amazed to see Nur as well, in chain mail and helm. The ladder was still out, and a moment later they stood on the deck, while the boat trailed.

"We've come for you, my brother!"

exclaimed Ruksha gaily. "We came together, to take you ashore with us—"

A shout from the decks brought Suarez around. He stared at what came into sight—two of the Red Sea galleys, below them in the river. And behind these, others innumerable.

What ships they were! Enormous, heavy, bristling with bronze cannon; solidly built war galleys, gleaming with arms and flaunting the green banner of Islam. Drums and trumpets filled the air at sight of the Portugals, and a roaring chant of voices upraised the warcry of Islam.

"Allah! Allah! Allah!"

Suarez was aware of Ruksha, plucking at his arm, and of two of his own men who bore his heavy armor to him.

"Come, come!" exclaimed the Rajput. "Come, brother; no time to lose."

Nur added her voice. In helm and mailshirt and cloak, she was a glorious thing to see. Words, hot impetuous words, broke on the lips of Suarez, for now destiny had taken charge of matters and all his plans were gone glimmering.

"Now? Go? Impossible!" Suarez glanced from one to the other. "Desert my ship, my men, my duty—no! Slip into the boat and go without me."

Ruksha spoke in his own tongue to Nur; she flamed up indignantly, and flung an order at the boat. Instantly, it cast off. Suarez spluttered protest, but Ruksha intervened.

"No! My friend, we stay with you, we share your fate like honest warriors—"

"But your sister!" Suarez swung toward her. "You must go!"

"I am a Rajput," she said calmly, and smiled. "Rajput women fight with their lords. I fight with you."

Distracted, stupefied, helpless to

change her mind, Suarez rushed to take charge of the caravel, for she was falling out of line. When she was in place with the others, it was too late.

Almeida anchored bow and stern in midchannel, the *Lisbon* and the *Santa Clara* on either side but a little behind, the five caravels likewise; thus the eight ships presented a wedge, with the *Royal Henry* at the apex, closing the channel.

There were no preliminaries. Emir Hussein led his galleys straight at the wedge, oars aflash in the sunlight, but because the channel was narrow, only a few of those enormous galleys could come to close quarters at a time. Behind the first group bulged others, and behind them, out to sea, the forms of others and the sails of the Gujerat fleet seemed to fill the whole horizon.

The bow-guns of the galleys spoke, pistols and musketoons spat smoke, but the cannon of bronze were silent; the Emir Hussein was so confident of taking all these Portuguese that he wanted their ships in good condition, and this confidence cost him dear. Almeida's broadside tore into him, and then the other broadsides, and the fight was on.

TO SEE anything afar was impossible. Powder-smoke drifted low over the water, hiding the other ships. Suarez, with pikemen and musketeers ready, waited on the quarterdeck and kept the guns rolling death at those who came. They came thick and fast, with bullet and bolt and arrow smiting through the smoke ahead of them, with yells to Allah pealing shrill; long oar-flashing shapes, so stoutly built that the cannon-balls refused to shatter their Dalmatian oak. They came, grapnels clung, and they boarded.

Then Suarez was into them, leading

his men, fighting back the assailants at every threatened point. Now and again they got foothold despite him, slashing and firing; then he whistled back his pikemen, and the musketeers loosed their shot, sweeping away the groups of boarders, and Suarez cleaned up the few survivors.

Such, in few words, was his theory of defence; it had endless variations. Not once, not a dozen times, not a score of times—but endlessly! The gray shapes drove in, the missiles hurtled, the boarders came, in ceaseless repetition; the Emir Hussein, in fact, was hauling out his battered galleys and sending in new ships, repeatedly. And ever the smoke rolled across the water, and the gun thundered, and the red decks grew redder and more slippery.

Faces through the smoke; wild Arab warriors, gaunt mailed Mamelukes, squads of Turkish contingents with their musketry. Everywhere, crests and insignia, for heraldry originated with the Moslems. And everywhere Suarez, in full mail, shield and sword at work, heading his lessening, reeling squads into the murderous work.

Now and again he was conscious of Ruksha beside him, pealing a Rajput yell and leaping into the fray. Twice he was aware of Nur at his side, guarding his back; the steel flew, the bolts flew, and through the smoke her voice and her eyes heartened him.

He needed heartening; hours were passing as the struggle wore on without cessation. The guns were speaking more slowly now, as the huge oared galleys swept in. Gunners were dead or dying, wounded were everywhere, dead men strewed the decks. The heavy mail saved Suarez from many a mortal blow, saved many a Portuguese beside him, yet this same mail threatened to be

their undoing. For a man could endure that weight in combat only so long, and then exhaustion began to creep upon him. Suarez envied the Rajputs their flexible, light steel mail this day.

They died, too; presently only three of Ruksha's men were on their feet, and even as Suarez counted them, an arquebus-bolt smashed through mail and breast of one, and brought him down in ghastly wise.

And then, suddenly, no more enemies came. With relief unutterable, the staggering Suarez saw the smoke lifting through the sunset reek; the day was ending. Downriver and across the mouth of the channel were anchored two of the great galleys, the others jammed beyond in wreckage and shattered might, and beyond these again, the sails of an innumerable fleet that filled the sunset.

THE three galleons and the five caravels swung to the tide unharmed, outwardly, but so filled with death inwardly that there seemed no life in them. Men flung off armor and threw themselves down, gasping in utter exhaustion; another attack must have finished them.

Presently the living rose from amid the dead. Wine and food revived them, and they fell to work with the wounded. The dead, Moslem and Christian alike, went overside. Suarez, with Nur lending a hand, was at this work, bandaging the hurt and calming the dying, when he saw Ruksha looking down at a native boat that had drawn alongside. Some words were exchanged, and the boat sped shoreward. Ruksha came to him, laughing a little.

"My father sent to know if I am dead or alive. Later tonight the boat will return; tell your guards to speak first

and shoot afterward."

Suarez looked at the half-crew remaining to him, many of these wounded, and groaned. He gave orders regarding powder and shot to be made ready, then caught a hail from the next caravel. All captains aboard the admiral at once! As they went, they heard the chanting voices from thousands aboard the Moslem fleet, uttering the prayers of sunset.

They met in Almeida's cabin, where candles flickered; eight men, stern of eye and hard of jaw, several of them wounded. Almeida himself looked strangely young, his face being very pale, for a shot had hammered his helm and he bled continually at the nose. Suarez ordered cold cloths brought and laid at the back of his neck, and this stopped the bleeding. Almeida gripped his hand and smiled.

"Ah, comrade! How little a thing seems anger now! How small are pride and dignity! Kiss me as I kiss you, in forgiveness."

They embraced, and Suarez understood that the admiral knew death was not far off.

NOW to council; what next? Almeida listened, while one after another spoke. The shore was at hand, for any who desired to flee, but no one mentioned this. Flight with honor lay only by sea, and this was practicable enough, as a grizzled captain urged.

He showed that until after sunrise next morning, the wind blew offshore, and would blow well. In the darkness with the tide serving, it would be simple for the three great galleons to slip down with stream and tide, the caravels behind them, and batter a way through the Moslem fleet. Those galleys had suffered terribly from the shot, and

could not resist. By breaking through to the sea, they could get away, for the Gujerat fleet was all of lighter vessels and could be outsailed or outfought.

So shrewd and sound was this advice, that one after the other spoke for it, except Suarez. Almeida's gaze came to rest on the young captain.

"And you, Dom Carlos? Think you this the wisest course?"

Suarez emptied his winecup and set it down, and smiled gaily.

"Senhor admiral, I was never cut out to be a wise man," he said whimsically. "Nor have I ever known a man who escaped death, save only Lord Jesu; it does not seem to me a great matter whether death lies over tomorrow's horizon, or a year hence, so only it come with honor."

The old captains growled, but Almeida gathered himself together and leaned forward, and his face was like a lean sharp sword.

"This will we do," said he, in a voice that admitted of no argument. "With dawn, we have the offshore wind for two hours, and the tide at ebb to favor us. At dawn, therefore, we attack. We fall on those two great galleys, board them, set fire to them, cut their cables; the stream and tide will carry them among the rest. We follow closely, working both broadsides as we go, and so break through the midst of the Moslem host and win to sea with honor and victory."

A grizzled captain who had sailed under the great Albuquerque, lifted his cup.

"To the King, to honor, to God!"

They drank the health with a roar of applause, and then arranged the details, and so separated.

When he came back to the *San Carlos*, amid the groaning of wounded men,

Suarez saw a shore-boat alongside. By torchlight, Ruksha was speaking with a court noble, and beckoned him smiling.

"Brother, my father has sent me a message, since I will not leave you."

The noble delivered the message. "Tell my son, says the governor, that I know he will not sully the sword I gave him; it is meant to drink blood, not dishonor."

So saying, the noble saluted Ruksha, put down a clinking package he had brought, and went ashore. Ruksha opened the package, to reveal a helm and suit of the finest chain mail.

"For you!" said Nur, coming to Suarez and smiling into his eyes. "It is light but very strong, as strong as this heavy mail of yours."

Suarez accepted the gift joyfully, and told them of the admiral's plan.

"It is still not too late," he said. "You can go ashore, both of you."

"If you'll go with us," said the Rajput, his dark eyes twinkling. "So? We're in good company, my brother, and why should we leave it?"

They smiled at one another, and went to get what sleep might be had despite the groaning that filled the whole ship.

BEFORE the dawn, Suarez put on his new chain mail but kept his own helmet because his men knew it. Quietly, the ships moved at the admiral's signal. Almeida himself, with the *Lisbon* beside him, slid down the gray water toward the two huge galleys of Egypt.

A shrill yell of warning, the blast of a shot—too late! They were alongside those galleys, were fast, their men were pouring aboard. Even while the fighting went on, squads of men were at work, getting up the square sail of each

galley, setting fires below, and cutting the cables. Then the two were let loose, to carry fire and death into the crowded mass of shipping beyond, as the dawn-light grew on the world.

The three galleons hoisted sail, the five caravels hoisted sail, and bore down in the wake of the fireships. But Suarez, watching from his poop-deck, went cold with dismay and horror, and clung to the rail, appalled. One of those galleys slewed in toward the river-shore and stuck fast on a sandbar and burned; the other bore onward, but not into the fleet. For as she advanced, the Egyptian galleys slipped their own cables, shot out oars, and easily avoided her; and instead of fleeing, they came on headlong for the eight ships of Portugal. And now, for the first time, the bronze cannon of Egypt ripped the sunrise apart with their voice, and at the first fire, the foremast of the *Royal Henry* toppled and was down.

Thus, with the sun lifting, the eight ships were ringed in by the enemy. They did not get to sea at all. They got barely to the river-mouth and hung there; and later, after the wind changed, it was too late.

And the cannon of Egypt, the bronze cannon greater than any they carried, blasted them.

The circle of death ringed them in grimly, stubbornly, while the wind from the sea blew the powder smoke away, now and then, to reveal the unyielding, unbroken circle. Point blank roared the guns of caravel and galleon. The great galleys of Egypt, built to sweep the seas of all Christians forever, rocked and were riven asunder. Some sank, and others drew back, but ever fresh galleys drove forward to replace them, and ever the bronze cannon thundered. For now Emir Hussein gave all that he

had, in wild desperation.

The *Royal Henry* was crippled. The masts of the *Lisbon* toppled, one by one. The *Santa Clara* was a wreck aloft, though her spars still stood. The caravels took the same dose. Only the ship of Suarez and one other, the *Prince John*, remained fairly intact.

No escape now, no breaking through. The galleys plowed forward to board, and could not, for the hot guns of Portugal smote them at pistol range and hurled them back, the shot plunging through and through them. Yet as fast as one sank, another crept in to take her place, while dying and dead men filled the sea; and out beyond, the fleet of Gujerat hung waiting, waiting, for the Emir Melik was well content to let the Red Sea galleys take their fill of this work.

CLOSE range for Portugal was close range for Egypt. The galleys might be shattered, but their bronze guns roared none the less; those galleys were of deep draught, built to roam all the eastern seas and rid them of Christians. Roam they would not, but rid they did; and the storm of shot tore into the eight huddled Portugals, while ever came aboard swarms of men who yelled to Allah and died.

Suarez was thankful now for the light chain-mail. It was proof, as was shown when a bolt hit him and turned, and a bullet bruised him sore but failed to break the steel links; and its light weight saved him from exhaustion as the hours passed.

The eight were doomed, and knew it; but suddenly the ships began to move. The tide had turned, and blazing noon saw the flood tide sweeping galleys and ships alike up the narrow channel with the mud-flats to either side. Torn

and wrecked and shattered, all were carried up to the lagoons before the city.

The smoke lifted and drifted away, the guns were silent. Now, desperately, the galleys of Egypt put out oars and limped away, those who could; with their heavy draught, they could not dare the shallow waters. Some went on the mud-flats, one burned and blew up; the rest put back for deeper water.

The three great galleons were bloody wreckage. Three of the caravels were no better, only the *San Carlos* and the *Prince John* preserving the semblance of ships. Four of the captains were dead, and more than half the men with them. Ruksha, gashed by an arquebus quarrel, was out of the fight, but Nur was unhurt and like a Rajput woman of true blood gave Suarez a hand with his wounded.

All that afternoon they labored terribly, with dead and hurt and maimed, and fell to work getting the decks cleared, the rigging in shape, the guns cleaned and ready. But, downstream, the lordly Red Sea galleys strewed the coasts with wreckage, and the Emir Hussein saw the dominion of the eastern seas passing from his hand, because of eight ships of Portugal.

With evening, Suarez would have sent Ruksha ashore, but the Rajput refused. Morning would see him afoot once more; he and Nur laughed at Suarez and denied all his pleadings. What? A Rajput leave such a fight as this to slink away in safety? Death were better than such shame! Besides, morning might find the whole Moslem fleet gone!

So they stayed. With sunset, Almeida called from his own high poop, his voice lifting to the other hulks anchored around.

"There is safety ashore for all who wish to go, and full permission."

A wounded captain on the next ship clung to his shattered bulwark and laughed.

"When do you go ashore, senhor admiral?"

"I stay," responded Almeida.

A chorus of shouts made answer, wounded and sound joining in with a roar of cheering from the crimsoned decks.

"Suarez!" called the admiral. "Come aboard me in the morning, at sunrise. And you others who live, come then also."

Not tonight; there was too much to be done, and when it was done, men dropped and slept. Later, when the moon rose, Suarez doffed his mail and stood for a little space in the moonrise, with Nur beside him. They said little, but stood hand in hand, looking at the lights of the city and the rise of the pearly buildings on the hill.

"Together, win or lose!" said she, smiling.

"Together," echoed Suarez, and their lips touched and clung, and with the blessing of the tender moon, they separated, too weary and spent for words, for food, for love.

NO ALARM this night, except a vast roaring murmur of voices, of drums, of cymbals, from the fleet outspread at sea. The time for breaking through that fleet had come and gone; of the little Portuguese squadron, now only two seaworthy caravels remained.

Dawn came up windless and still, with mist hanging over the river and town and mud-flats. Wounds were stiffened, faces haggard and unshaven, powder magazines half empty, crews

reduced to skeleton outfits of able men. The admiral was anchored a little way out from the other ships, as though ever ready to bear the brunt of battle. When Suarez went aboard, he was appalled by the sight that met him, for the whole ship was riven and torn asunder by shot. Almeida, however, was calm and smiling, greeting him and the other two captains, both of whom were wounded, with food and wine and quiet words.

"Comrades, I've been thinking over what I would do, were I the Emir Hussein," he said. "The galleys of Egypt are wrecked and battered, moreover they're too low in the water to dare the shallows of the harbor here. Therefore, it seems to me that today we shall meet the fleet of Gujerat under the Emir Melik, for these are lighter vessels and unharmed."

"They'll remember the meeting," said one of the captains grimly.

"So I think," Almeida assented. "We have two caravels which are comparatively little hurt. We can load what remain of our men aboard them; and, when the tide ebbs toward noon and the breeze comes up, make a final effort. Our caravels can smash through these light native craft, and the pilots tell me that when there is no wind, as now happens, the breeze will come up off the land—"

A man panted in upon them.

"To arms, to arms! Their host is upon us—to arms!"

So the talk was ended, and Suarez was caught aboard the *Royal Henry*; no going back to his own ship now. On deck, men were at stations, wounded and sound alike, and the light proas of Gujerat, stealing up under the mist, were within fifty feet, and oaring forward with a burst of yells and an onset of the light guns they carried.

Thus, all in a moment, the battle broke, as the sun rose and the mist dissolved. Suarez had only time to wave at the figures aboard the *San Carlos*; then hurriedly borrowed a helmet and joined the admiral. He had come aboard wearing only his sword and the light mailshirt.

Shafts whistled and balls thudded; but the guns of the high galleon were loaded and ready. Now they began to thunder, straight into the foremost proas. Those long, light craft fell apart, but others came speeding in, and ringed the admiral's ship on all sides; they had evidently determined to make an end of her first, since the others were attacked in half-hearted fashion.

Almeida's guess had been right. The whole fleet of Gujerat came in, crowding and massing forward until half the lagoon was solid vessels and wreckage about the galleon. Their light guns,

their muskets and bowmen, blasted her decks with missiles; now and again they managed to get aboard, only to die under the hot steel.

SUDDENLY the ship rocked and staggered. The cables had been cut; drifting with the flood tide toward the other ships, she had struck some fish-stakes, ripping out her bottom. It was the end. Already the guns were falling silent, as men died and guncrews shifted. A yell of despair, and Suarez looked to see the admiral down, his leg broken by a ball.

"Up, up!" he gasped, as Suarez lifted him. "To the mast—tie me there! No surrender, men! No surrender!"

He was propped on his one sound leg against the mast, sword in hand. Suarez passed a rope about his body; at this instant came a thud and a clang. An arrow-shaft stood out of Almeida's

Lucky that he wore no armor now! The light steel shirt scarcely bothered him, but armored men sank quickly.



body, pinning him to the mast.

"Leave it alone!" he cried, as Suarez would have broken it away. "Leave it! Fight!"

Men were pouring up from below; the ship was settling. Over the rail, amidships, the Gujerat warriors were scrambling. No beating them back now; they came in on beam and bow.

Suarez headed the remnant of the men. There was no withstanding the fierce swords of Islam, however; back and back the survivors were driven, until at last, on the high poop, they were ringed about the mast where Almeida's life was draining.

Through the press of foes came a splendid figure in gilded mail—Emir Melik himself, shouting an offer of life and liberty to all who surrendered. It was Suarez who leaped out at him, sword ready. For a space all others held off, as the emir accepted the challenge and darted in, curved blade flaming. The steel met and clashed, but only for an instant. Suarez, abandoning all effort to cut, suddenly thrust in over the curved blade, in with the point—in where mailshirt met helm. Pierced through the throat, the emir slid and pitched down to death.

With this, the flood was loosed, and surged in upon the little ring. The hulk was reeling and sucking down. Her decks burst. She pitched under, while men struck and fought and stabbed as the water closed about them, and there all died.

SUAREZ, sucked down amid the surging waters, dropped sword, thrust off helm, and struck out. He was unhurt, beyond a few light scratches. When he came to the surface with bursting lungs, he was amid a welter of wreckage and corpses and

drowning men. None paid any heed to those in the water, however, for the Gujerat craft were oaring in to reach the other two galleons.

He swam steadily, cool-headed, avoiding those who clutched and stabbed, keeping clear of the oars. Lucky that he wore no armor now! The light steel shirt scarcely bothered him, but armored men sank quickly.

As he swam, he saw the ships surge, the light proas changing position. The tide had turned—this fight had lasted the whole tide, for the sun was high overhead now. The *Lisbon* was burning, spouting smoke into the sky, the *Santa Clara* fought on but was nearly taken; two of the dismasted caravels were swarming with foes. Then Suarez found himself under the side of the *San Carlos*, whose guns still held the light craft off. He called, and called again. His voice rose through the tumult.

Nur, clinging to the rail, heard it. She screamed at men nearby. A rope was thrown, and Suarez came aboard, dripping, laughing, still eagerly ablaze with life. He looked at the drift of vessels, he looked at the trees now bending to the offshore wind, and he saw the other undamaged caravel, the *Prince John*, bending a scrap of canvas.

"All hands!" Leaping to the break of the poop, he sent a roar down the deck. "Up sail, up sail! Slip the cables! Two men to the tiller—keep the guns going, there!"

The guns roared, fast as they could be worked. The canvas fluttered out, the great square foresail bellied to the gust of wind. As the cables were slipped, the caravel gave a lurch, a stagger, and crazily leaped away through the water.

She paused. A frightful sound of screaming rose from beneath her fore-

foot; she paused, rose a little in the air, and crunched down. She had struck a proa squarely amidships, and smashed through its wreckage. Others avoided her. The river channel was given her, and the *Prince John* came careening after like a drunken thing.

Two proas tried to catch them, and were splintered aside and left to drown. Out into the river-mouth, where the wreckage of Egypt's fleet was strewn by shore and sea—straight ahead, high and bluff-bowed, the light Gujerat proas scattering hurriedly before them. The two caravels of Portugal headed on seaward, and Suarez, at the rail, shook his fists at the host of Islam.

"We'll come again!" he shouted, and found Ruksha beside him, white teeth flashing in a wild laugh.

"Ha, brother! For you, defeat is glorious victory! For the Emir of Egypt, victory is ruin. When you've turned over the ship to your Viceroy, you'll come back to Chaul with us?"

Suarez looked out to sea for a moment, then shook his head.

"No," he said, and put out his hand to Nur, and smiled. "There's a priest aboard the *Prince John*, if he's still alive; and the Viceroy will welcome me, and my wife."

And the two ships of Portugal sped on, to destiny of empire.

TRIREMES

ONE OF the most widely held misconceptions of ancient war-vessels is that they had banks of oars. That is, that the seats of the rowers were so arranged that the lowest and shortest oars were manned by rowers close to the side of the ship; the middle range by rowers seated farther inboard and above them; and the longest oars by rowers still farther inboard and higher, in steps inclined somewhat backward.

Classical scholars have been most insistent upon this arrangement. Unfortunately they have not been also practical seamen. In refutation of various practical arguments, innumerable arrangements have been set forth, but the most essential objection of all still remained: that of getting the oars of various lengths to act in unison and not encumber each other.

Napoleon III, when writing his "History of Julius Caesar" made a practical test of the scholars' theory. A trireme, at his order, was constructed and tried out on the River Seine. The three banks of oars, as *trireme* would indicate, were fitted and arranged again and again according to the combined advice of classical scholars and hardbitten seamen, but the superposed banks of oars would not syn-

chronize. A satisfactory method could not be worked out. Furthermore, among the wall paintings found at Pompeii of Roman warships of various sizes and types, none shows anything but a vessel with a single bank of oars.

Realistic scholars are now inclined to the opinion that a wrong definition has been made of the Roman and Greek triremes. It is believed nowadays that the ships were not triple-oared, but triple-manned, that is, three men to an oar.

Historical fact confirms this view. In the old navies of the Papal States, the Republics of Venice and Genoa in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, as well as in the royal galleys of the old French monarchy, there existed no ships with superposed banks of oars. Instead, the galleys, as they were all generally called, were distinguished as to size and type by *trireme*, *quadrireme*, *pentareme*, and similar names, and were manned by three, four, five, etc., men to the oar. It may well be assumed that this arrangement was a direct heritage of the classical ships of the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Phoenicians and others far, far, back into the beginnings of naval warfare.

Allen Fiske.

The Coming of the Goths



Huge uncouth figures . . . hewed with enormous axes and long heavy swords at a frightened mass of guards.

by R. A. EMBERG

Illustrated by JAMES CARR

James Carr '99

FORTY years had elapsed since Odin, appearing to men at Upsala in Svithiod, had commanded the Swedes and Goths to fare south into the lands of the Romlanders. With three ships Berig, King of Gothland, had begun the migration the following spring. And though Berig had long since been taken to Asgard, the consummation of what he began loomed near. After years of

fighting and wandering in the lands south of the Baltic, their depleted numbers constantly reinforced from the Scandinavian peninsula, the Goths, in two clans, the Balts and the Amalings, under their chieftains, Wulf and Guntharic, had forced the passes of the Carpathians and emerged on the plains of southeastern Europe.

At midnight, in a wattled hut village,

on the shore of the Dniester River, two hundred miles from the Black Sea, blue eyed, yellow haired men huddled about a scant fire, talked in angry voices. The wind howled out of the north and a gritty November snow swirled about them.

Guntharic, a blonde giant of thirty, watched from eyes bleared with lack of sleep, the effect of Wulf's speech on the others.

The rivalry between himself and the leader of the Balts had come to a head. In sight of the rich lands of the south, Guntharic was fiercely determined to push on. Wulf, every bit as courageous, was more cautious. The fringe of human scalps adorning his bearskin shook with emphasis as he drove his point home.

"This is my counsel," the Balt said, smacking a huge fist into the palm of the other hand. "Stay here till Spring. There are many fighting men in Ocum and a Roman legion in Dacia. We muster three thousand swords. Not enough to take the town, let alone hold it. We have women and children, the aged and the wounded—"

"By the gods," Guntharic rudely interrupted, "those words don't come from the warrior who stood next me when we hewed the Turcillings and Esthonians. Is it that the back breaking portages in the Carpathians have softened you?"

Wulf sprang to his feet with a bellow of anger. "I take that from no man," he roared. "Two cooks spoil the best of broth. The Goths with two leaders will never conquer the Romlanders. Guntharic and I have been at loggerheads over long. Draw your axe, son of Odin!" He brandished his own.

"Aye," Guntharic rasped, "but first," his fiery glance took in the Balt's hirdsmen. "Let it be understood that if I

slay Wulf, we take up the march to Ocum."

The Balts, about half of those at the fire, talked in low tones. Guntharic waited.

In a nearby hut an infant cried. A mother crooned to it. A wolf howled on the steppe. A dog barked defiantly in return. Alarmed, the stock at the picket lines moved restlessly.

The Balt hirdsmen came to a decision. Wulf's kinsman, Amal, announced it. "If Guntharic slays Wulf," he rumbled through his red whiskers, "we will march wherever he commands."

Guntharic turned to his own followers. "If I am slain," he said, "you will accept Wulf as leader."

TORCHES were kindled and in a circle ten feet in diameter the two men faced each other with raised axes. The flares shed a smoky yellow light and shadows danced on the hard packed snow.

A lagman gave the signal. There was a low shout from each man, a clash of steel and the axes threw sparks as they ground together.

The men circled each other warily, superb axemen both. First one, then the other, was forced to the edge of the ring drawn in the snow. The hirdsmen grunted encouragement as a telling blow fell or narrowly missed.

Wulf's axe swung with a tremendous swish, Guntharic's countered, he slipped on the treacherous footing and went down on one knee.

With a triumphant cry, Wulf jerked the weapon short, high, and slashed viciously. Guntharic dropped his axe, drew a dirk from his belt and dived at Wulf's legs. Wulf's axe thudded into the snow, then he was bowled over by the other. Before the Balt could get to

the dirk in his belt, Guntharic's knife tore upward, sinking deep under the armpit. Wulf gasped, quivered and collapsed. The snow reddened under him.

Carried away by the frenzy of the fight and its spectacular ending, one of Guntharic's hirdsmen leaped to his feet and flourished his axe. "The gods have spoken," he cried. "Forward to Ocum. There, a shieldwall death, a warrior's choice. Here, hunger death, ice death, a craven's choice."

"Aye," Guntharic panted. "If we three thousand Goths can't cut the throat of every man in Ocum and defend ourselves against any force the Romans bring against us this winter, we are unworthy of the name." He looked hard at Amal, now leader of the Balts. "You will keep your word," he asked, "you will march with me?"

"Aye," staring at the body of Wulf, "together the Balts and Amalings shall sing the song of Asgard. We march with you, son of Odin."

THE Goths were on the march. The warriors were mounted, but due to the scarcity of horses, many rode double. Even the oxen drawing the wagons carried riders on their bony rumps.

The women and children, the wounded and the aged, rode inside the wagons. Because of the intense cold, the fighting men were unmailed, their armor being with the baggage.

Day after day they pressed forward. Famine and disease took toll. At night, funeral pyres lighted the sullen landscape as the bodies of those who had died during the day were given to the flames. If no fuel was to be found, the bodies rode in the carts till they could be given proper cremation. Gaunt and determined, the horde moved south.

Two weeks after leaving the village

on the Dniester, came a day when the air was warmer and the depth of the snow less. Indications were that they were approaching an inhabited district. Outriders were thrown out to cover the head and flanks of the column.

Guntharic and Amal rode in the van. They talked. Guntharic, who had reconnoitered the land the previous summer, was speaking of the walled town of Ocum.

"There is a river that flows into the city through an arch in the wall. We examined it at night and the thought came to me that a few brave carles could swim through."

"And then?" Amal asked.

"Slay the guard, open the gates and have the host rush in. It could be done . . . now what?"

The last remark was occasioned by an outrider flagging a winded horse toward them.

"This is not the way to Ocum," Guntharic said sternly as the man careened up.

"There is a camp beyond that hill," the rider gasped, obviously frightened, pointing to a small hillock directly in front of the column, "aye, a camp of trolls!"

"Trolls!" Guntharic's voice was harsh. "Since when has a Goth feared a troll?"

"Never have I seen such strange beings," said the man. "They are bent and misshapen. They have no beards and they have dots instead of eyes!"

Guntharic held up a hand and the long column creaked to a halt.

"Forward to look at these trolls," he said to Amal. "Sigurd may be right. The land is new and strange. We may see sights to equal those of the Carpathians."

The three rode their horses ahead.

Dismounting at the base of the hillock, they went on foot to the summit where from a thicket of brush they looked down on the scene that had frightened the outrider.

IN THE lee of several small hills was a camp of several hundred people. There were tents of black felt and a picket line to which was tethered a number of shaggy ponies. A band of sheep huddled together for warmth at one side of the camp. The truth of Sigurd's contention was clear. The people moving about were such as the Goths had never seen — small, high cheek boned, dark haired, and their eyes appeared to be black dots in sunken leathery faces.

Amal pulled at his walrus moustache. "My mother was an alruna woman," he whispered. "When I was a bairn she told me of the Hunlanders who came out of the east and made war on the Svear at Sigtuna. They were beaten away and many were slain. Some were made to be thralls. My mother saw these thralls at Upsala. She described them as bandy legged and dot eyed. These are no trolls. They are Hunlanders and mighty men of war. They fight on horseback and use a bow that will drive a shaft through the stoutest mail . . ."

"They have good horseflesh," Guntharic said. "We need horses. Sigurd," to the outrider, "stay here and watch. Amal and I return to the column to prepare a folkhewing."

The two Goths spurred back. In a few minutes the chieftains had been called together and a plan of attack made.

The prospect of a fight instilled new energy into the wearied ranks. Cold mail was donned and when all was in readiness, the men were divided in two

bands. Guntharic at the head of one rode to the crest of the hill where Sigurd waited. Amal led the other to the mouth of the gully leading from the Hun's camp. There, he was to prevent the escape of animals which might be ridden or driven down.

With loud war cries Guntharic and his band charged down the hill. With the perfection of long practice gained in the great trek from the Baltic, they burst on the Huns like a thunderbolt. Many were killed before they could grasp their weapons. A few mounted ponies and fled down the gully to be met by the swords and axes of Amal's men.

One, when he saw no hope of escape, caracoled back into camp. Snatching a bow and a quiver from a dead man he wheeled his mount and again headed for the gully. He set an arrow to string and discharged it. Before the shaft found a mark in the throat of a red bearded Goth, a second was in the air. Six arrows found targets before Guntharic, spurring alongside, cleft the Hun from crown to chin.

No quarter was given on either side. Nor was it asked. Outnumbered, the Huns were butchered. When the last man had been cut down, Amal and his men rode up the gully. Guntharic wiped his axe on a wisp of straw.

"A sweet little fight, eh Guntharic?" Amal grinned.

"I've seen worse," Guntharic grimly returned.

"The ravens will feast well tonight."

"Aye. And the mead flow in Valhalla when the Valkyries have carried the warriors home. We've lost three score men. These Huns can fight. I hewed me down the greatest bowman ever seen. I wish we could handle a bow as he did."

The Goths with the looting instinct of their race were ransacking the camp.

Guntharic moved toward the picket line to examine the horses.

FROM a large tent in the center of the camp, came the cry of a woman, and two Goths emerged with the trembling figure of a girl. They threw her at the feet of Amal where she crouched in the blood stained snow. That she was not Hunnish was apparent even to the Goths. Of voluptuous mold, in her early twenties, small, dark-haired and dark eyed, she was evidently of Grecian or Latin extraction.

"Who are you, Maiden?" Amal gasped. "And what do you with the Huns?"

The girl could not understand the rough gutturals of the strange man. She spoke pleadingly in an unknown tongue.

Amal shook his head. "Hew her down," he said. "We want no strange woman in our train. Better kill her than leave her here to die of cold and hunger."

Reluctantly, one of her captors raised his axe.

The girl screamed. Frantically, she threw her arms about Amal's legs.

The Balt's face was hard. "Strike!" he commanded.

"Wait," came a stern voice. Guntharic had come up. "Hold your weapon. She may be of the Ovim. If so, she will be useful. Take her to the wagons."

A silent, sharp clash of wills. Amal yielded to Guntharic. "Only an Amal-ing would dare countermand an order of mine," he grunted. "She's yours, Guntharic."

After the man with the girl across one shoulder had gone the two chieftains entered the tent from which she had been dragged. Along one wall was a

cushioned divan, evidently used for a bed. A charcoal brazier, its coals still glowing red, stood on the floor. On a low table were the remains of a meal: an earthenware bowl filled with curded mare's milk and a haunch of mutton.

"The wife of a chieftain—or a captive held for ransom," Guntharic hazarded.

The oriental appointments of the pavilion were strange to the Goths, and the aromatic incense which permeated the tent new and alluring to their nostrils.

Shouts of laughter drew the two men outside. One of the Goths was trying to draw to ear a laminated horn bow taken from a dead Hun. Despite his muscular development he was unable to fully draw it. Nor could the other Goths. Amal for all his massive shoulder could not, neither could Guntharic.

"I understand now why the Hun arrows hum," Guntharic said. "If the Romans and Ovim use such bows and have the courage of these Huns, Odin will be needing a new hall to Valhalla."

Driving the sheep and horses before them the Goths took up their journey. Guntharic would permit nothing else to be added to the already crowded transport. "When we are masters in Ocum," he said to a remonstrating warrior, "then will be time to return and garnish the gear."

IT WAS the fifth day after the battle with the Huns. The Goths were in fertile country with many farms and vineyards. They avoided all villages, making long detours at times. The travel was at night on a diet of raw mutton.

Between several small hills, the dominant feature of the rolling terrain, stood the wagon train. On the brow of a hill facing south, Guntharic, Amal and a



The Balt's face was hard. "Strike!" he commanded.

group of haulds surveyed the land before them. Guntharic pointed to a barely discernible cluster of buildings far out on the plain.

"There is the town," he said. "The bright ribbon to the west is the river. The ribbons to the east are ditches of water from which the Ovim water their lands. In that direction," pointing to the southeast, "is the Roman town of Nicopolis. There are many *swinfylkes* of Roman soldiers there."

"Are the Romans men of valor?" Amal asked.

"For slaves, yes. They fight as we do, in *swinfylke*, although the shields are not linked. Their tactic is simple. They hurl a heavy javelin and advance to the onset with short swords. Their arms will be no match for our heavy blades—but, we face fighting men when we meet the Romlanders."

"There should be a rich loot," an avaricious glint came into Amal's eyes.

Guntharic shook his head. "When we take the lands of the Romlanders we settle down in their way. To till, to trade, to rule. To make a beginning for the hosts yet to come."

"Goths are warriors, not merchants," Amal retorted. "Look!" he pointed to the wagon train, "does Guntharic think to make cages for the free men of the north? We know nothing of ruling cities."

"We shall learn," Guntharic said. "Such were Odin's commands."

Amal smiled disbelief, but remembering the camp on the Dniester, was silent.

THAT evening after sundown, Guntharic and a dozen men left camp. They were unmailed and one of the men carried a coil of rope.

Avoiding the vineyards, they rode to-

ward Ocum. Veering westward they crossed a road used by the peasantry in bringing produce to market. After an hour's ride, the Goths came to the bank of the stream, and on a hard tow path turned their horses toward the city. Cautiously, they approached the wall.

In a watch tower a light gleamed and was reflected from spear points and steel helms.

"Romlanders on the battlements," Guntharic whispered.

Leaving the horses in a willow thicket, the Goths investigated the arch through which the river flowed into the town. The stream was swollen by melting snow and the water swirled furiously.

Guntharic removed his bearskin. He tied one end of the rope about his waist. He whispered instructions to Smid, his house carle. "If the rope be tugged once, take up the slack and hold. If it be tugged twice, ease away. When I tug thrice pull me back. If I fail to return after the middle of the night, you will go into the arch and get the information I've told you of. And you others, if Smid doesn't come back, don't tarry. Return to camp and inform Amal."

Making sure that he was understood, Guntharic eased into the water. The current snatched at him and carried him under the arch. Turning on his back and thrusting his face up against the slimy stones, he floated for what seemed ages. Once he struck a hard obstruction and stuck fast. At the cost of skin from his hands and face he came free. He had been entangled in the bottom bars of the portcullis which had been raised to prevent driftwood from jamming on the arch.

The stars appeared overhead and Guntharic knew he was through. He

swam to shore and climbed the slippery bank. Tying the rope to a piling he gave one tug. The rope tightened as the slack was taken up. Groping in the darkness, he emerged on a street. No one was in sight. He disappeared in the direction of the city gates.

ON THE bank of the river, the men waited. Hours passed, but no tug came on the rope which Smid had tied about his waist. The men whispered. Smid fiercely ordered them to be silent. A horse whinnied and the Goths tensed themselves for the expected cry from a Roman sentry. None came. "Go to the horses, Wulf," Smid ordered one of the men. "Keep them from neighing."

An hour later Smid prepared to go under the arch. He had removed his bearskin when the rope was tugged three times.

"Guntharic," he whispered. "A hand on the rope."

Hand over hand they took it in. Guntharic was on the end, chilled to the bone from his double immersion.

He was jubilant. "Quick," he whispered, "to horse. Tomorrow will see us masters of the town. I made a circuit of the walls and only at the main gate are there more than a dozen guards. They, however, are Romlanders."

AGAIN after sundown, the Goths were on the march; this time only the warriors. The non-combatants and baggage remained in camp.

Arriving at the road which led to the city, the Goths divided. The main body under Amal rode to the south and took up a position a quarter of a mile from the main gates. Guntharic and a hundred men took the tow path by the river and rode toward the arch.

As on the previous night, Guntharic's

men were unmailed. Arriving at the willow thicket, a dozen men were left with the animals. The others followed Guntharic.

He was first in the water and under the stones. Inside the walls he waited to guide the men. Smid checked them off as they plunged in. "You Sigismund, now you, Alaric, Alfson, you next. In you go, make haste . . ."

The Goths emerged dripping wet, and on the river bank mustered into their places. Moving silently over the route chosen by Guntharic, advancing one by one when necessary, they drew close to the main gate.

The word to halt was whispered back. Guntharic went ahead to reconnoiter. In a few moments the advance was resumed.

In the shelter of a tower flanking the gate, the band assembled, whispered instructions were given, and Guntharic led the charge!

CAIUS FLAMMINUS, Roman centurion and representative of Caesar, sat in the atrium of his villa. He was bored to death with Ocum and the Ovim, because nothing ever happened, at least, nothing much. Of course, there was that band of Huns who had carried off the daughter of Sulpicius, his gate captain, but that had been very much out of the ordinary. When the weather moderated, he, Caius Flamminus, was going to teach the Huns a lesson. A few crucifixions and they'd probably head back for Asia. Meanwhile, a fellow had nothing to do but get drunk. "Ho hum," his tour of duty in Ocum would be over soon. Then Britain, Gaul, Africa, where things really happened.

His musings were interrupted by a discreet cough. Sulpicius stood before

him. The gate captain was a blue eyed German. Taken captive when a youth, Sulpicius had been sold as a slave in Rome. Manumitted later by a kind master, he had taken service with the Eagles, married a Macedonian wife while serving in that province, taken a Roman name, and raised a Roman family.

"Yes, Sulpicius, what is it?" the centurion asked.

"Pardon, excellency," Sulpicius was humble, "it's that rumor again. A peasant just came in with the story that when he returned to his farm from Ocum, he found his house burnt and his family fled. He took up the trail of the raiders and watched them go into camp at the Three Hills. I thought to send out a patrol, but not until I had consulted you. The peasant is in the guard room if you wish to examine him."

The centurion waved a hand impatiently. "Always suspicious, Sulpicius. Your peasant has had a visit from that band of Huns. Who else could it be?"

"Yes, excellency, but isn't it our duty to protect the outlying districts?"

The centurion fixed him with a glassy stare. "That is for me to determine, not you."

"You will not examine the man?"

"No. Let the centurion who replaces me in the spring worry about these cattle of Ovim."

"It may be too late in the spring, excellency."

"I'll have you broken, Sulpicius. You are impertinent."

"Pardon, excellency," Sulpicius shrugged his shoulders, he had been threatened with demotion before.

The centurion eyed him. Had he been too severe with the man? Sulpicius had been with the Eagles a long time. "Any developments in your daughter's

case?" he asked in a milder tone.

"No, Excellency, the messenger has not returned."

"Hmmm, too bad. Here. Have a goblet of Falernian. It will be a change after the vinegar and water of the guard room."

"Thanks, Excellency."

After Sulpicius had gone, the young centurion tipped the flask of Falernian many times. He got drunk and fell into a sodden slumber to dream of leading



The current snatched at him and carried him under the arch.

his century against northern barbarians. He was prodded into wakefulness by blue eyed, flaxen haired men who resembled his dream enemies very much.

SULPICIUS made a round of the wall. From the arch above the river he gazed intently into the north. The dim horizon told him nothing. Wait! Was that a movement in the willows on the right bank of the stream? No. Just the night breeze causing them to sway. He looked at the river. The water was still high and driftwood covered its surface. He passed on. At the portcullis windlass, he paused. For a moment he thought of ordering it lowered. Then he smiled to himself. Getting old and nervous. There was no danger. He returned to the guard room.

In the guard room a peasant requested that the gates be opened to permit him to return to his village. Sulpicius refused. Ordinarily, the good natured German would have ordered the gates opened. Tonight, a vague tenseness, a sense of hovering peril made him adamant.

"No," he snapped. "You'll have to wait till morning; either that or you may jump off the wall. The gates will not be opened . . ." He stopped with the last word unuttered. A chorus of savage cries rent the air. Sulpicius drew his sword and with a cry to the guard to follow him, ran toward the gates. A terrifying sight met his eyes and a fierce clamor assailed his ears.

Huge uncouth figures, dripping water, hewed with enormous axes and long heavy swords, at a frightened mass of guards. Other wild men tugged with unfamiliar fingers at the bars of the gates. They pulled them free, the gates creaked open, a strange man ran out and called in a familiar tongue. Sul-

picius had heard it years before in the forests of his native land.

His sword was struck from his hand by an axe. The axe was lifted high and swung for Sulpicius' head. Wise in the ways of war, the German dived at his assailant's legs. In a second the two were rolling on the ground. The Roman veneer slipped away and Sulpicius lapsed into German invective. Then a flash of light and the gate captain slumped senseless from the blow of an axe delivered by a comrade of the Goth with whom he had been struggling. The man raised the weapon for the finishing stroke.

"Hold," cried the other Goth. "He is of our race or a German. If he comes to life, Guntharic will want to question him. Pull him in the shelter of the wall."

By this time the watch had come up from the other sections of the wall. With stern Roman discipline they formed in the array used in battling unruly mobs. This was some desperate outbreak; by whom, they didn't exactly know. They cared less. An hour, two hours and the leaders would be on crosses on the walls.

Then an avalanche of horsemen swept through the gates. Savage commands rasped out. The Goths dismounted and formed into the dreaded *swinfylke*: the boar head formation. The men who had opened the gates closed them again.

The populace of Ocum, wakened by the noise, poured into the streets. The land had long been at peace. Behind the van others crowded until the street leading to the main gate was packed from side to side. Then began murder.

The boar head moved relentlessly against the mass. Pressure from the rear prevented those in front from fleeing. Sword and axe licked out at Roman

legionaries and the men and women of Ocum. Far into the morning the stars looked down on the bloody slaughter. The Goths surged from one street to another. And ever the shrieks of the wounded, the frightened and the dying, mingled with wild Gothic war cries until sheer weariness of arm and leg put an end to the butchery.

IN THE villa of the late centurion, Guntharic sat at a carved table brought by Caius Flamminus from Rome. Other Goths filled the room and listened. Guntharic was questioning Sulpicius, who with bloody rag bound about his head, stood before him.

"You speak our tongue, Roman?"

"No. I speak German."

"It's practically the same. How is it that a Roman speaks German?"

"Not that it's any business of yours, Goth," Sulpicius replied, "but I am a German. When a youth I was taken captive in a great battle north of the Rhine. Since then I have been a soldier of the Romans in many lands."

"What is your German name?"

"Eberwulf was my name in my native land."

"Eberwulf, in return for your life will you teach us the ways of the Romlanders that we may prepare for the hosts yet to come from the Baltic?" There was friendliness in Guntharic's voice.

Eberwulf was unimpressed. "An old dog learns no new tricks, Goth, nor can an old soldier serve a new master. I have been of Rome too long. If you take my life I count it little. My fathers wait me in Asgard."

"How now, Eberwulf? You are of the Aesir faith?"

"Aye. The Romans care not what religion a man profess."

"And you will not accept your life in

return for your service?" Guntharic's tones were harsh.

"A man seldom throws his life away unnecessarily, Goth, but mine has been lived. My wife is in Vingolf these many years and my daughter is captive to the accursed Huns. It matters little what befalls me."

Guntharic whispered to Amal. The Balt pulled his long moustache and nodded.

"What do you mean?" Guntharic asked Eberwulf, "your daughter is captive to Huns?"

"A band of Huns to whom we gave freedom of the city to trade horses, carried her away. They ask a ransom I cannot pay and we had not the force to pursue them."

"Eberwulf," Guntharic asked, "if we should restore your daughter, would you teach us the ways of Rome?"

"Goth," Eberwulf replied, "if you restore my daughter I will go to Rome and slay Caesar if you ask it."

"Bring the maid," Guntharic whispered to a hauld.

In a short time the man returned with the girl taken in the camp of the Huns. Eberwulf's eye rested on her and a glad smile lighted his features. He called to her in Latin. Impetuously, she brushed aside the restraining hand of the Goth, rushed across the room and threw herself into her father's arms. The Goths waited, shuffling their heavy feet and twiddling clumsy, frost bitten, calloused hands.

Eberwulf stroked the girl's hair. He talked gently to her in Latin. Then the two knelt before Guntharic. Eberwulf took Guntharic's hand. He raised it to his forehead. Releasing it, he stood erect, the German warrior. "Goth," he said in German, "from this day forth I am your man."



It was
his fate
almost always
to have to prey
upon wild creatures
larger than himself.

Blizzard Snack

by ANTHONY RUD

Illustrated by
DON NELSON

THE wheeling, whirling white blight of blizzard came to the Sitka spruce forests of the Skeena River on the second day of October. It poured down the slope of the Coast Range, into the long north-and-south valley of steaming hot springs and great bear fat from spawning salmon and luscious berries.

The huge bear of the region, kin to the Kodiak, sometimes do not hibernate here, in this valley between the Coast and Cascade ranges, since winter ordinarily is but a name. But sometimes real winter arrives for a short time, overpowering the lush heat which lies just a few feet underground over the whole region, and which vents in steam jets to keep the atmosphere warm and moist.

When this four-day blizzard came, the creatures of the wild were caught without the provision their kin of the Barrens always make. Except the bear, all others crept into niches in the vertical 1,000-foot cliffs, and slowly grew ravenous from hunger. The bear was ready to hibernate, and needed only this below-zero chill and stinging onslaught of icy needles, to make him drowsy. He ambled away, woofing sleepily, and was seen no more till May.

Ordinarily half of the kingdom of the wild tries to eat, while the other half tries not to be devoured. But after a blizzard all are hungry; and chances are taken for that first slaving repast, which transcend both courage and recklessness.

Spitfire was a genuine wildcat. He was two feet long, and his hairy tail

added fifteen inches to that. Except for the tail, he looked like an oversized and very bad-tempered, green-eyed tomcat of some tame species gone wild.

But Spitfire's ancestors always had walked alone; and none had made the lazy compromise with man, for the privilege of sitting at his camp-fire or hearth. The tail symbolized that. It looked exactly like the tail of a tame cat that is being chased by a dog. At first glance you would have said it was impossible for a tail to swell further. But then you had not seen Spitfire in action.

This was a miniature tiger, ounce for ounce and pound for pound as ferocious as any Bengal striper that ever lived. This was a tiny tiger, born in northern British Columbia and inured to the hardships of life there, instead of the fawning easiness of the warm jungle.

Now with the blizzard finished, and a few hours of below-zero cold come upon the long, vertical valley, the demands of appetite were upon Spitfire—and upon all other wild creatures as well.

That made it hard. Spitfire totalled eleven and one-half pounds of carnivorous ferocity. But it was his fate almost always to have to prey upon wild creatures larger than himself. And this day they very well might be stalking him!

SPITFIRE left his niche of a cave, descending like a tiny avalanche to the rubble lined shore of the skurrying Skeena. There, almost covered by the snow, he went rigid. To his ears, above the surr-surring of the river with its occasional wash of breaking wave, beyond the great cathedral silence which lay above this small monotone, through all the tremendous sugar pines and Douglas firs and Sitka spruces of the untouched forest, had come a far dis-

tant peal of hollow laughter!

There was no humor in that laugh. It was blood chilling. Spitfire waited, holding his breath. For another hellish, blood-curdling laugh came. Another. Downstream, around a wooded bend came eight heavy set birds—heavier than swans, and not so long of neck.

Great northern loons! These are the biggest and most dangerous of all wild-fowl in America, some old males weighing as much as seventy pounds. And all of that is fighting ferocity, plus a wisdom and an eyesight that smacks of the uncanny.

Whoo-oo-ah-h-hoo-oo! One of the leaders gave that mournful other cry of the loon, and led a way into a back-water under the overhang of a cliff. The seven smaller loons followed. They were out of sight now. Spitfire crouched and crept swiftly down the rubble in their direction.

No thought of odds. This was a possible meal—probably the toughest and fishiest meal in the world, but food. And the wildcat was ravenous.

Spitfire stalked a squadron of loons. He did not know and did not care that Cree Indians and eager white men with telescope rifles often tried their best to bag a loon—only to see the quarry duck and go below the surface, apparently dodging the invisible bullet, long before the sound of the shot could have reached it.

Loons in the water *have* been shot.

Usually they have been killed by a man with a shotgun, waiting for them to come around a bend in the river, or around a point in a lake. A man in ambush can kill a loon. A man in a canoe never can.

Almost tunneling, Spitfire made for the sheer drop of three yards, below which the loons were resting, occa-

sionally letting go their whickering awesomeness of laugh—in which there is no mirth, only a ghastly cacophony of sadness, if one is close enough to hear the laugh without the echoes.

Suddenly there came a wish-thud back of the wildcat. Spitfire dropped flat, almost out of sight. Lolloping along the snowbank came a gray-white shape. A snowshoe rabbit, not yet quite camouflaged in his winter outfit of white.

Spitfire tensed, then relaxed. The rabbit was pursued. Out of nowhere behind flashed a long, thin, black shape. It caught the agonized bunny in mid-leap. There was an instant or two of snarling and ferocity, a single high-pitched squeak from the rabbit—and then the glutton, the wolverene, sank out of sight in the snow as he settled down to drink blood and break his blizzard fast on the choicest tidbits of rabbit.

Spitfire's eyes slitted. The wolverene would not eat all. There would be the tougher parts left, if he cared to wait, then go back and scavenge. But with a flick of tail, Spitfire turned his green gaze the other way. A wolverene, though weighing less, was the one animal in all the wild he hesitated to face. It would be a tough battle if the little black killer was still there. Not worth it. Anyhow, a wildcat almost never eats the kill of another animal. Nothing but real starvation would make him do so. Spitfire was hungry, but not quite that far along the road to starvation.

HE HAD tunneled no more than a dozen more yards, when a tumult arose behind him and above. Up there was a sort of broad ledge, with a crack which might have been a cave or a



The fox brought matters to a climax.

passage to some ramp that led to the top of the cliff.

Suddenly, anyhow, six dripping muzzles appeared there at the rim. Wolves! And down from the rim, barely escaping them, beating heavy wings that needed thirty yards to raise the body in flight, came a woodcock, a capercaillie. It skidded down, throwing red-bronze feathers. It struck, and then Spitfire was upon it, biting, clawing, trying to subdue its struggles.

Wah-eee! The high whine of ferocity struck terror into Spitfire, before even he felt the claws. Then he, the woodcock—and a heavier, striped fury—went over and over in a snarling fight that lasted two long seconds.

Then Spitfire smelled his superior officer, and crouched, surrendering. The snarling fight ended a few yards away. A hungry Canadian lynx, four times the weight of Spitfire, wolfed down the bird he had killed, feathers and all.

He turned and glared at Spitfire, but did not attack. Perhaps his appetite

was sated for the moment. Perhaps he did not like to eat small cats, except in extremity. Anyhow, he left. And for five full minutes there was no sound there on the bank of the Skeena.

Then a loon laughed. Nothing scares a loon. The squadron probably had heard everything, but just had listened—and then laughed. They were still there, within twenty-five yards!

Spitfire went ahead with his stalking of the loons. But now the loons were laughing among themselves, and Spitfire was not the only hungry stalker. Two more wildcats were converging upon this backwater of the stream, where nine feet below the rubble of beach a squadron of arrogant, tough but toothsome birds had come—perhaps to talk over loon scandals, preen their feathers, and tell each other how inferior the steelhead salmon of the Skeena were to the spawning army of yesteryear.

Now a hungry red fox joined the stalk. Spitfire saw him, and snarled silently. Spitfire could chase the fox easily, but he was a disturber. No finesse. He probably would let his rank smell drift down into the nostrils of the loons, and send them scoting.

Spitfire wasted no time—but a watcher who did not know all the technique would have thought him dreadfully slow. But in twenty more minutes he was crouching in the snow and brush almost above the waterline of the eddy in which the loons swam. Trod water would be a better term, since they moved their feet slowly, and meanwhile smoothed their feathers with the long, gray-yellow bills.

On the other side of the Skeena, human beings were building a railway line through to Prince Rupert, on the coast.

In this year of 1911 there were no trains running, but just at this tense moment in Spitfire's life, there came a handcar along the rusty strips of steel, with two men working at the transverse lever.

All the wild waited as though blizzard frozen, until the handcar snailed its way around a bend, and was gone.

NOW two more wildcats beside Spitfire were watching the loons. The fox had come close, smelled cat, whined softly, then circled upstream to jump down to the rubble below, and start a new stalk. A beady-eyed mink also watched, from below at the other side.

The fox brought matters to a climax. Down there at water level, he found no concealment. So, foxlike, he attempted none. Quite as though he had an errand down the river bank, one which was of such importance that a loon more or less could not affect it, he trotted straight down the rubble shore, not even seeming to look at the octette of great birds there in the eddy.

Of course his oblique eyes watched them hungrily. He really could not have much hope, but anything is a chance after a four-day fast. He fox-trotted daintily down, and almost even with his giant quarries. . . .

OINK! observed the huge loon leader, pointedly. He sounded almost like a great hog in that moment. All his flock turned heads and looked at the seemingly indifferent fox, trotting down so very close to them all.

The loons did not think of flight. Their necks turned and stretched toward the small red marauder. Just let him start something, they all seemed to say. Just let him try, and see what happens!

Over beyond them, the mink saw the fox coming, and started business. He dipped below the surface and swam fast, hoping to get a loon from below, and drag it down, while all the flock's attention was riveted upon the fox. In his swim he came up just once, a mere dot of eyes and nose on the surface. Then he sank and swam fast, sure of his objective.

Spitfire saw all of this. He also saw that the two wildcats who were near him on the bank, were females. No thought of gallantry bothered Spitfire. Lovemaking is always better on a full stomach. Only females are more pragmatic. They were apt to beat his time if he didn't put on one of his very best performances. He started.

The fox chose that instant to turn, sprint and leap. The mink reached the idly paddling legs of a loon and fastened on grimly. And Spitfire gauged the distance, and leapt straight for the neck and back of a Great Northern Loon. Whether by chance or choice, he had elected to do battle with the old drake leader, a battle scarred veteran of ten northern winters.

A little late, two more wildcats sprang. One missed and splashed. The other caught claws in the back of a loon that had decided to fly.

Spitfire had a good hold, but he had the tough, armored protector of the loon squadron. He crouched and clawed, and started in earnestly to chew his way through the back of a muscled neck. He wanted to reach the spine, and sever the cord. . . .

Beset in three directions, and by no less than five hungry enemies at once, the loon squadron lost its indifference, and panicked. All the eight started to try to fly—after a first ducking had re-



The bald eagle
was starved.
It swooped.

vealed the dismal truth. The water here was too shallow for such big birds.

Now, a loon in deep water might easily batter and drown a swimming man. Or a loon on land would certainly give concentrated hell to a wildcat, a fox or a mink. Beaks and heavy wings would stun and mutilate, probably kill.

However, a heavy loon in very shallow water is practically helpless. Its wings are of no use—except to batter frenziedly at the air and water, and attempt to take it into the air. It takes a full grown and unattached loon at least one hundred feet to lift itself a yard out of the water.

With any kind of enemy hanging on, flight is impossible. All a loon can do is make for deeper water, where a foe can be drowned. And in the autumn of

the year the Skeena is not a very deep river, save in certain holes. Mostly it is three or four feet deep.

THE mink won his battle—though it was not over for a good ten minutes. Then a crimson stain, far up the shore, told how the grip of claws and teeth had shifted, and a loon's throat been torn out. But Spitfire neither knew nor cared about this. He was battling the fiercest engagement of his whole life.

Somehow, rolling over and over, Spitfire lost his teeth-grip. Then the big leader loon had him. Beating his wings, he slammed into the rocks of the shore, dislodged Spitfire, and then with ten or twenty terrific strokes of his wings, he knocked the wildcat bloody and unconscious—for a space of seconds.

In those seconds the loon laughed once, raucously and derisively. Then it splashed back into the river and went to the rescue of a squadron member which was trying very hard, twenty yards out into the river, to drown a wildcat. And eventually succeeding.

The red brush of a drowned red fox floated past, but the old leader paid it no attention.

Spitfire was just stirring in the red-blotched snow, when a shadow flitted across. Then suddenly the shadow swooped. From the two-hundred-foot top of a Sitka spruce atop the highest cliff to the north, a bald eagle had seen the conflict. He had seen a body, a wildcat, lying there. He had swooped, circled once to be sure this was not some booby trap. Then the seven-foot wings had half folded, and the great eagle swooped. Wildcats and bobcats were ordinary prey, though usually the eagle liked to get them young.

A freshly dead wildcat was a treat, though. It would make up in splendid fashion for the days a blizzard had made the old bald monarch huddle in a tree, head and crooked beak hidden under his wings.

The bald eagle was starved. It swooped, and tremendous talons seized the almost limp, slightly stirring carcass of Spitfire. Then with a beating of wings, the great bird rose with its prey.

With the gouge of those cruel talons in his wounded hide, Spitfire came suddenly awake. Then he spit with horror and fright, and the fifteen-inch tail grew as big around as the swab for a field gun.

Down there on the shore a female wildcat, who had seen Spitfire and admired him, uttered a regretful "Mrr-arrh." Too bad young fellow. . . .

But do not sign off on Spitfire just yet. Wait a moment. Something very strange is happening up there only forty feet above the river level! Of a sudden the bald eagle has gone into a flutter. He is trying to use his beak in mid-air!

Spitfire fights grimly on. He has one of the grey-yellow ankles, above the talon, in his teeth. He chews. . . .

Suddenly a furry plummet drops. There is a splash in the shallow Skeena. Then a small head arises. Hating water, like all cats, Spitfire swims fast for the shore. He emerges. In his jaws is the foot and part of the ankle of a bald eagle. The eagle flies crazily, and finally crashes on the far shore; but Spitfire neither knows or cares.

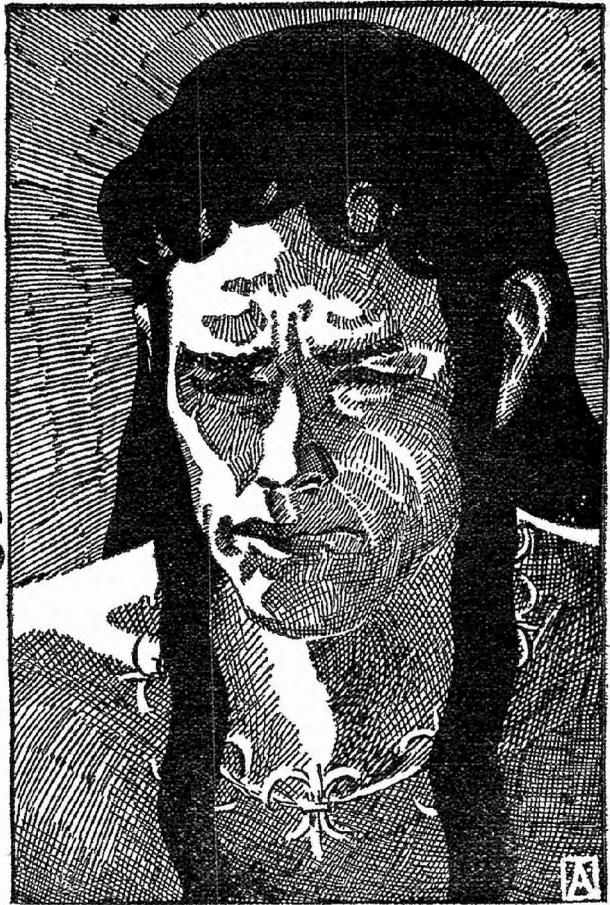
He has crawled into the snowy brush, and is busily gnawing on the tough bit of live meat which will have to serve for his blizzard snack.

The Bath of King Minos

(CLAY TABLETS FOUND NEAR
PIT-GRAVE AT AGRIGENTO, SICILY)

by
CLYDE B. CLASON

Illustrated by
MAURICE ARCHBOLD, Jr.



"Not even my daughter, the divine Ariadne,
knew the secret ways from the palace."

ION I, son of Rhadamanthos, long since dead, brother to the sea-king Minos. The sons of my father are four. Talos, he to whom the divine Ariadne was pledged, was foremost in the sports of bull-grappling. Meriones is wisest in counsel, and none are so skilled in the use of the sword and the spear and the bow as the valiant Deucalion, the third son of Rhadamanthos. But, as I am the youngest of my father's sons, so I am in all things the least of them.

Grievous were the ills that had befallen us at the time I begin this record. The image of the bull-headed god who dwells in the Room of the Double-Axe had been broken and stolen from his

shattered body was his mighty weapon, our sacred *labrys*. Talos, our brother, could not be found: though we made search for him through the many rooms of broad Knossos, we found him not. Gone also was the daughter of the Minos, she whom men call the divine Ariadne, and desolate the halls of the palace without the gay laughter of our princess.

And none doubted that all of these things were the work of Theseus the Athenian, he who had been a guest in our uncle's royal house, for the black-sailed galley of that Achaian prince had departed as stealthily as a thief in the night.

So we three sons of Rhadamanthos took counsel with our uncle in his throne room: a pleasant place, surely, with its red walls and black pillars and ceiling of brightly painted beams. The Minos sat upon his gypsum chair, the Throne of the Pointed Arch upon which only he and his seed might sit, and he wore, looped across his uncovered chest, his golden chain of fleurs-de-lys, the design which only the heaven-born may wear.

And he listened, without speaking, to our arguments.

First Meriones: "Theseus alone would shatter the stone image and remove the sacred axe. Not one of our people would dare an act so fraught with ill consequences, but the Athenians worship strange gods: Zeus and Athene and others whose uncouth names I cannot remember. So he must be punished."

Next I: "It is Theseus who has carried away our cousin Ariadne; borne her away by force since her heart was given to my brother. No punishment we can devise is great enough for that crime."

And Deucalion: "Where is Talos? Not alive would our brave brother suffer the Athenian to depart with his betrothed. Theseus has slain Talos, and his body lies cradled in the depths of the Green Sea. Our brother's blood cries aloud to us, and I will not shave my beard again until our vengeance be accomplished."

Thus spoke we three, and the Minos answered us.

"Look also for a traitor within our gates. Is Theseus a spirit that he could pass through doors unseen by the guards who hold them? Few know the secret ways from the palace; not even

my daughter, the divine Ariadne, knew them. Even if she went willingly away with the Athenian — a shameful thought!—she could not thus aid him."

"Daidalos the architect knows every turn of the palace well," said Meriones thoughtfully. "I suggest, O heaven-born Minos, that without loss of time we question him."

"Truly you speak, wise Meriones, and the orders have already been given. But in no part of the palace can that mad, cunning rogue be found."

BUT, lo, even as our uncle spoke, there entered an officer and washed his hands in the stone tank opposite the throne, as all must do before they may address the Minos. And our uncle bade him have his say.

"My lord, your servant Pharos is unworthy of the commission entrusted to him. He has not found the architect Daidalos nor Icaros his son, but a fisherman is even now waiting in the hall outside to bring tidings."

"Let him be brought before us," the Minos commanded.

A humble man was the fisher, naked save for a ragged loincloth and wearing not shoes nor sandals; a man with unkempt hair. So ignorant was he of palace usage that he did not wash in the lustral basin until commanded roughly to do so by the officer. Then the Minos ordered him to speak.

But the fisher looked with wide eyes and gaping mouth about the splendid room: at the stone chair of the Minos upon its raised platform and at the silvery river, fringed by waving plants, which wends its way across the wall, and at the painted monsters, wingless griffins, which rise from the painted river on either side of the mighty

throne. And the sight of these so terrified the simple fisher that the words would not leave his lips.

But the Minos bespoke him kindly. "We mean no ill to you, good fellow. Indeed, you shall be well rewarded if you tell me what you know of Daidalos, the palace architect, and his son Icaros."

"My lord," the fisherman trembled, "what can a man like me know of those great names?"

"The lord of the Double-Axe," the officer said sternly, "wishes to know about those whom you saw embark on the merchant ship which weighed anchor at dawn for distant Sicilia."

And at this the face of the fisherman brightened. "It is true, my lord, I did see a man and a boy on that ship who were not of its crew. The man told the ship's captain that they went to Camicos on urgent business of the heaven-born Minos, which is you, great lord. And in token that he spoke truth he showed the captain a gold chain. So close did my small boat pass to the side of that great galley that I could see all on the deck above. I was then returning from the bay with my catch, for know you, royal Minos, that it is in the hours before dawn that the sea-fish best be taken."

"Fool, what are your fish to me?" the Minos interrupted. "Of what age was the boy?"

"Between twelve and thirteen years, my royal lord."

"Of that age is Icaros, the son of Daidalos. Did you note the design of the chain which the man showed to the ship's captain?"

"Yes, my royal lord, for I have sharp eyes. The design was the same as that of the chain which even now you wear."

But the fisher looked with wide eyes and gaping mouth about the splendid room.



BUT in all the land of Crete, there are not more than two golden chains of fleurs-de-lys; the design is one sacred to the heaven-born, and even we, the sons of the just Rhadamanthos, may not wear it. So my brothers and I exchanged glances; it was plain now that our traitor had been found, and our hearts burned with anger to think that he should thus shamefully steal the ornament from the throat of our divine cousin.

Our uncle gave no sign of his kingly wrath, but nodded gravely and rewarded the fisher for the news with a ring

drawn from his kingly finger. And he said to Pharos:

"Let a war-galley be dispatched at once in pursuit."

The officer, a good man, he, and faithful, answered, "The order has already been given, my lord, and yet I greatly fear that the merchant ship cannot be overtaken. It is swift, and has had many hours' start, and, moreover, the shore winds have changed and are now unfavorable so that only the oars may be used."

The Minos frowned. "If the ship is not overtaken, I must go myself to Sicilia. Otherwise, Daidalos will place himself under the protection of King Cocalos. Well I know that rogue! He will soon ingratiate himself by his many arts with the Sikel king, and to others Cocalos might refuse to surrender him. But me he will not refuse."

But Deucalion, the hot-blooded, took issue with our kingly uncle.

"Grave though the crime of Daidalos, it is small compared to that of the Athenian who bribed him, even with our royal cousin's gold chain. Let Daidalos go for the time, lord of the Double-Axe, and dispatch the full strength of your war-fleet to Athens that we may recover our princess and avenge our brother's death. But if you will not do this, I myself will go, alone or with my two brothers."

Not in this fashion was he accustomed to being addressed, the lord of the Double-Axe, and I marveled at my brother's boldness. But the Minos took not offense.

"Deucalion, man of war," he asked, "from whence comes the metal of which your sword is forged?"

Deucalion looked long upon his horned sword—breast-high it stood,

with hilt of gold and pommel of onyx, and the keen blade graded skillfully with stirring scenes of sea-battles. And our brother said:

"Though I play with this fellow daily, yet I know few of the secrets of his manufacture."

But the wise Meriones did not lack for words.

"FROM two metals does it come, one red and one white, in a union of which the proportions are nine of the red to one of the white. The red metal, as well you know, my royal uncle, is brought to us from Asi (*the ancient Egyptian name for Cyprus — Translator*), that island in the eastern seas. Nor is the supply like to fail us, for between us and the Pharaohs who hold that land there has ever been friendship. But the white metal is as rare as it is needful; such of it as may be found is brought from three-cornered Sicilia. In exchange for it we send to the people of Cocalos pottery and woven garments and our finished swords, for the Sikels as yet know nothing of metal-smelting, being little better than savages."

(Translator's note: If Sicily were indeed the source, hitherto unknown, of the tin which the Aegean civilization employed in large quantities, its deposits were undoubtedly exhausted by the Classical Period, which began nearly a thousand years after the time of Ion's narrative. There is no evidence that tin was mined there, either by the Greek colonists or by the Romans who followed them.)

Then my uncle smiled, for dearest to him of us all was the wise Meriones.

"Now, Deucalion, you tell me why the Sikels cannot prevail against us in battle, though they are a people brave and warlike."



Restoration of a wall painting depicting a wingless griffin. From the throne room of the palace of King Minos at Knossos.

"That I do know," said Deucalion. "They cannot stand before our long swords with their short ones."

"And for that reason," said the Minos, "we make sure that the swords which we supply them are always shorter than ours and of inferior manufacture. But Daidalos is well acquainted with the secrets of the metal-workers' craft, and will not fail to reveal them to the people of Cocalos if we permit him to remain there. And for the sake of the white metal our hold over the Sikels must be preserved."

"But the Sikels lack the red metal," I said.

"And lack the ships to send for it," added my brother Meriones.

"Do not the Sikels have trees?" demanded the Minos. "Can they not build

ships as well as we, once they know the manner of their construction? And Daidalos can tell them of the shipwright's art; there is nothing he cannot do, that mad, cunning knave. Thus, I must sail without delay for Camicos, so grave a danger I deem this man to the power of our island-empire."

"And is Theseus to escape?" demanded the angry Deucalion. "Is the fate of your daughter nothing to you, lord of the Double-Axe, that you put a white metal before it? Since you will not go yourself to Athens, uncle, give me but a single galley, and I will rescue our princess and avenge Talos."

"You shall have fifty galleys for that task," said the Minos. "There is no man in Crete fitter than you to lead them against Theseus."

BETWEEN the sons of Rhadamanthos has never been jealousy or anything other than brotherly affection. Thus, Meriones and I were as pleased at Deucalion's appointment as if ourselves had been chosen. And we made haste to offer ourselves to serve under our brother's leadership, but this the Minos would not suffer.

"Some one must rule in Knossos during my absence, and who so well suited for it as you, Meriones? And, Ion, you are to come to Sicilia with me; one who visits far lands needs the ready sword of a kinsman by his side."

Though we would rather have gone to Athens, Meriones and I quickly agreed to do as our uncle wished. That which the Minos has said cannot be lightly unspoken by others. Then were the war-galleys for the two expeditions made ready: fifty took Deucalion and fifty the Minos, and still ships remained to guard our harbors and our distant trading posts.

(Translator's note: That these figures are no exaggeration will be recognized by those familiar with Cretan sea-power during the period of Ion's narrative—Late Minoan II—approximately 1450 to 1400 B.C. Some two centuries later, when Crete had sunk to a shadow of its former vitality, Idomeneus, "the famous spearman," was able to bring "eighty black ships" to the siege of Troy. "Iliad" II, 632-664.)

Thickly the hair grew upon the face of our brother, as he stood upon the deck of his flagship to wave good-bye, for he was keeping faithfully his vow not to touch razor to his skin until he had avenged the death of Talos. And soon after his departure I sailed for Sicilia with the kingly Minos.

Red and white were the square sails of our galleys, but purple was the sail

of that on which the Minos rode. The rich dye is yielded to us by a certain shell-fish, but so grudging is he of the precious drops that the color may hardly be used except by the blood of kings. Twenty to fifty oarsmen sat at their benches on each galley, to labor mightily whenever the winds turned contrary, and thus our fifty ships crossed swiftly the Green Sea.

AND I noted that the ancient name our fathers gave these waters was scarcely accurate, for once away from shore they deepened to blue, of all hues and tints, even to the dark shade of our purple-black wine. Pleasant it was to look down on them from the open deck that ran the length of the vessel above the rowers; pleasant to steer the swift ship from the raised castle in the stern. And the crossing took us many days, for Sicilia is an island at the western edge of the world and a land of strange marvels, among them a mountain that spouts fire. A long time did it seem until we had sighted its crest: higher it appeared even than our own Ida, a summit on which gods might dwell.

Glad we were to see that mighty mountain belch no fire when we drew near to it, for we had feared its flames greatly. So fierce are they, it is said, that they melt the very rocks, which flow even as water in fiery torrents which consume all things. Surely is such a mountain a sign that the Goddess does not love the savage Sikels,—although they profess to worship her,—for many centuries ago the fire spat from its crater and flowed over their cities and those of their kinsmen, the Sikans, of whom few are left today. *(Diodorus mentions this eruption—Translator.)*

And to guard against this happening

again, the Sikels now dwell far from the danger on the southern coast of their three-cornered island. And the manner of their country is first ocean, then beach, then woodland and meadow, all sloping upward to a steep ridge. Beyond the first ridge is a valley, north of which are two towering heights. So close together are they, it seems some giant had taken his sword to carve out the narrow wedge between them. Steep and precipitous are their sides, and tall their summits above the sea. And on the eastmost height is builded the city of Camicos.

And a river splits in two branches: these have carved ravines, safeguarding on the east and on the west the ridges and the valley between them. Thus, the whole area is a natural fortress, of such strength as I have never seen.

(Translator's note: Diodorus, who had access to ancient Cretan sources, locates Camicos on the site of the later Greek city of Akragas, the modern Agrigento, and Ion's description fits fairly well the topography of that section. The height upon which the city was built may be recognized as the "Rupe Atenea," upon which, tradition asserts, a temple to Athene once stood.)

AFTER we had shored our ships, so that they might stand upright on the beach, we cut trees from the wood, hacked them clear of branch and twig, and with mighty blows drove them deep in the ground to form a wall in a circle about our galleys. And when the wall was done, we builded another in a circle a little larger, so that if one barrier failed us, the other might stand. Doors swinging on hinges and bolted by wooden bars did we put in each tall wall; these doors were at opposite sides

of the circle. Thus, they who gained the outer gate must traverse half the circle to reach the second entrance, and in that narrow passage between the walls a few of our well-armed men might prevail over many Sikels. And the outer door looked forth upon the sea.

Now be sure that our arrival was not unknown to King Cocalos. From the lofty height on which his city was built he could see us plainly, though we were two miles distant from him. *(The units in which Ion expresses distance would, of course, be meaningless to the reader, so I have attempted to estimate their equivalent in English measurements.—Translator.)* And while we were building our stockade, the king sent men to learn why we came.

Much did we laugh among ourselves at the appearance of these Sikels. Hair grew thickly over their faces, for they know not the use of the razor, and some clothed themselves in the skins of animals.

And others wore the garments which our merchants had given them in exchange for the ore bearing the white metal, but these were the strangest of all. The merchants, dearly loving the jest, had never told the Sikels of the differences between the garments of men and those of women. We men of Crete care not for the weight of clothing, since our bodies delight in the warmth of the sun and the soft kisses of the breeze; so is our common garment no more than a cloth bound by a girdle about the waist. Thus went the lower classes of the Sikels, but their officers, strange sight it was to see, were garbed in the flounced skirts of our women, reasoning, doubtless, in their barbarian fashion, that since these garments were so much more elaborate than the simple waistcloth, they must be designed for

those of higher rank. (*May not the persistent tradition of Amazons have arisen in some such fashion?—Translator.*)

BUT I write too much, like an old man who refuses to come to his point, though urged by all to do so, and I pray you who read to forgive my prate. Little else do I have to do but write in the sad days which are now upon us. Now the Minos, our great and wise leader, bespoke the messengers of Cocalos with courtesy, yet would not do as they invited and go to the palace at Camicos. Though each embassy from the Sikel king was larger and brought more gifts than the one before, to them all the Minos returned the same answer:

“I have sailed a long way to see Cocalos, so it is only fitting that he should walk a little way to see me.”

Thus they contended in their pride, these two monarchs, while we of Crete conversed with the Sikels. They, though a backward folk, are people of our own race and speak our language, though in truth they speak it badly. From them we learned that Daidalos had indeed arrived on the merchant ship we had not been able to overtake and that much was being made of him at the palace of Cocalos. But Icaros was not with his father: the unfortunate boy, leaning too far over the deck, had fallen into the sea where he drowned before rescue could come to him. The Sikels said that Daidalos grieved mightily over his son's death, but we could not find it in our hearts to pity this man who had so shamefully assisted in the abduction of our princess. And, though we did not then know it, he was to work us even more harm.

Wondrous are the workings of diplomacy, though I understand them

not, nor ever shall! For, behold, not long after we had finished our second wall and were racing and casting our spears along the shore, another party of Sikels came and with them King Cocalos.

This barbarian prince, though he was as shaggy-bearded as any of his savage subjects, wore a woman's skirt, swelling stiffly outward from the waist to the floor and adorned with many ruffles; above the waist his only garment was a necklace of shells. A chaplet of such shells, pierced and strung on a thread, made his crown, and for sceptre he carried a heavy wooden club. Such was Cocalos, and so comical a figure did he present that it was only by the greatest efforts we could keep the smiles from our faces.

AND Cocalos brought gifts to the Minos: wild honey found in a hollow log in the woods, fish speared by his men from the river banks (for they have no boats to venture on the sea), fruits, and clay vessels holding milk and cheeses. These were all he had to give, poor barbarian, for the Sikels possess naught of value, save only the ore bearing the white metal. And in return the Minos gave Cocalos a purple waistcloth brodered with gold flowers (in such our brother Talos had once delighted), a mantle even as the one the Minos himself wore on occasions of ceremony, a gold chain, and a bronze sceptre, and a pair of curved bronze razors. These last pleased Cocalos more than all of his other gifts, for he had never seen their like before and did not even know their use until the Minos told him. Then he came near to shaving himself at once, before we could begin our conference, but finally remembered that he, too, was of

kingly blood and bade us welcome to his island.

And with the utmost courtesy the Minos thanked Cocalos for his gifts and asked if the reports concerning Daidalos the architect were true. And Cocalos replied that Daidalos now dwelt with him at Camicos, even in his royal palace.

"Then," continued the Minos, "I have a favor to ask of my brother, the king of the Sikels, whose might and whose power is second only to my own. So gravely has this Daidalos displeased me that I have sailed the length of the world to ask you that he may be given to me for the punishment he deserves."

But Cocalos looked down at the ground and with his wooden club traced a design in the sand.

"O my kingly brother, you know not how hard a task you set for me! This cunning man, Daidalos, has carved images of wood and painted them with colors, and the like has never been seen before in our land. So real do they appear that one would swear they did speak and move. Only, of course, it is not so, for how may a wooden image speak and move? Yet these puppets have enchanted my daughter mightily, and much she loves their creator, and wroth would she be with me were harm to befall him. So ask of me anything but that, my brother, for my daughter is dear to me, and I cannot plunge her in the sea of sorrow."

The Minos heard him out, nor showed his royal anger, and I had never so much admired the wisdom of our kingly uncle.

"It is wrong that your daughter should sorrow, King Cocalos, and well I understand your love for her. I, too, have a daughter who is dear to me, and

so am I here and not in the halls of my kingly palace. Tell me, my brother, the punishment you would give the man whose rude hands bore away by force your daughter."

Then Cocalos in great anger dashed his heavy club against the sands. "So should he die, nor in any part of Sicilia could he hide to escape my just vengeance."

SAID the Minos, "It is Theseus the Athenian who has carried away my daughter, she who is my only seed, and he shall be punished, even as you have said. Now counsel me from your wisdom how you would punish the man who aided such as Theseus to snatch your daughter from you."

"He should die, too, O Minos, even as the other." And Cocalos dashed once more his club against the sands, breaking in twain a log cast up by the sea.

And the Minos said, "That man is Daidalos, and so I have sailed the length of the world to beg him from you."

For a long time was Cocalos silent, but at last he spoke:

"It is only just that you should have him, and so must I weather the storm of my daughter's tears. But it is not fitting that so great a king as yourself should be lodged only upon the barren ground, my royal brother. Come you and ten of your people to the palace that we may feast and make merry."

I liked not that my uncle gave his assent, though in my heart I believed the Sikel to be a simple man who lacked guile. And the Minos selected me and nine others to go with him to Camicos, leaving our camp in charge of Pharos, yes, that same officer who had first informed us of the flight of Daidalos.

Now the city of the Sikels is a city so well guarded by nature that it can be approached on but one side. And as we trudged up the narrow path to the steep heights, the Minos laughed, saying, "It is well, my brother, that we come in peace and not in war. On this path a handful of determined men might hold back thousands."

Loud laughed the Sikel king, his brawny shoulders shaking with his merriment. "What is this talk of war between us, my brother? Think you that we are so ungrateful as to forget the benefits we owe your land of Crete? And besides," he added with a barbarian's candor, "my men cannot face your long swords. Why is it, my brother, that the swords you send are always shorter, though I have asked many times for those of the length your people carry?"

But the Minos spoke of other matters.

SO WE traveled to Camicos, which is hardly more than a collection of mud-walled huts, for the Sikels lack skill in building. And the palace of Cocalos is little more than a huddle of such huts, with doors pierced between them to form the separate rooms, and nowhere in height is it greater than one story. No sooner had he bade us welcome to his quarters, than the barbarian king laid by his flounced skirt and shell ornaments, for quickly had he remarked that the Minos was not so garbed. And he arrayed himself in the purple waistcloth and the mantle the lord of the Double-Axe had given to him. Then the Minos directed that I should with my own hands shave our host's face, and this I did, though it galled me to perform so menial an op-

eration. And Cocalos laid by his wooden club and took in its stead his new bronze sceptre and great was the change these things made in him. He looked now not unlike a king, for he is a tall man, well-muscled in chest and shoulders, and bears himself with good dignity. And the Minos complimented him upon his improved appearance, and Cocalos answered:

"Shame be upon me, my brother, that I have so long neglected to minister to your comfort! Is it not true that your people of Crete do not bathe as we do in sea or stream, but in clay chambers, set within the rooms of your dwellings, in which may be placed water warmed by the fire?"

"It is so," the Minos answered. "Pleasant is the touch of the warm water upon the naked body, and so do we thus bathe daily."

"And is it not true, my brother, that when you of Crete wish to welcome an honored visitor, you lead him to such a clay chamber and bid the daughter of the house assist him to bathe?"

"That, too, is so, my fellow monarch."

And Cocalos laughed so that his great shoulders shook. "The Goddess be praised, my brother, that I may welcome you in your own royal way! The merchant ship that brought Daidalos brought also one of your clay bathing chambers. Come, I shall show you. And my daughter herself shall assist you to bathe, even as your nephew has assisted me to remove the uncouth hair that covered my kingly face."

But when we saw the tub of which Cocalos was so proud, difficult it was to restrain our laughter. For the knavish merchant, perhaps in jest and taking advantage of the ignorance of his kingly

customer, had sold to him one of the painted clay coffins in which we bury our illustrious dead.

"Is it not a thing of beauty?" asked Cocalos. "Is it not the same as yours of Crete?"

And the Minos replied gravely, "It is exactly the same, only finer than most of ours, and glad I will be of the chance to lave the sweat from my body."

"I, too, have bathed in it!" cried Cocalos delightedly. "Pleasant it is, as you have said, to lie soaking in the warm water! Come, daughter, fill the ewers from the bronze cauldron that now stands simmering above our fire! And bring cold water also, as you did for me on the other night, so that the bath may be brought to the temperature our kingly visitor desires."

THEN Cocalos left us, so proud of his new raiment that he could not forbear showing it to those of his people who had not seen it, and the daughter of Cocalos gave orders to bring the ewers. Her dress was cut low in the front, so that both of her breasts were bare, as was long the fashion at Knossos, but is no longer. Her hair was black as a raven's plumage, and her brows arched sharply above her dark eyes, and in her face there was a wild, sullen beauty.

And the maids bore in the tall clay vessels: five held water steaming hot and five held cold. And the daughter of Cocalos poured from them herself, mixing the hot with the cold in the coffin that was of the shape of a square chest. Then she knelt and undid the thongs of my uncle's shoes, and the Minos tested the temperature with his bare foot. And when he had nodded, she bade her maids remove the clay ewers.

And the Minos unfastened his golden girdle and stripped off his purple waist-cloth and stepped, all-naked, into the coffin, his knees drawn up before him, since it was too short to permit him to stretch his legs. Well did I know that it was only my uncle's kingly courtesy that led him to accept such a bath! Yet I could not repress a shudder, so ill it seemed that a man should bathe in a chest meant for the dead.

While the daughter of Cocalos assisted the Minos in his bath, I stood outside in the doorway, my hand never leaving the horned guard of my sword, suspecting treachery, though I knew not why.

And the daughter of Cocalos fell suddenly to the ground and with her two hands clasped the knees of the lord of the Double-Axe.

"Mercy, heaven-born, I beseech your mercy!"

"And what power have I in your father's kingdom?" the Minos asked gravely.

"Well I know, my royal lord, that with your gifts and the honey of your words you have won my father from my side. So I, a princess, must beg mercy of you, mercy for Daidalos, who has gained my heart."

And the Minos removed her hands from his kingly knees.

"Little mercy did Daidalos show me when he assisted the Athenian to bear away my daughter."

"Lord of the Double-Axe, of her own will your daughter went with Theseus. Daidalos did naught but help his princess to gain the man of her choice. And that was a gallant deed and a noble one, my lord, and for it he should not be punished."

But the Minos frowned. "Shameful that I should have such a daughter!

She was pledged to Talos, and so has she broken the word of our kingly house, which I and my father and my father's father and his father's father before him have held inviolate."

"Strong are the commands of the heart, as I, the daughter of Cocalos, can tell."

"And it was the duty of Daidalos to warn me of my daughter's flight, so that I might take steps to preserve our honor. Now is that honor fled from us, through fault of his, and for this Daidalos must be put to death."

THEN the daughter of Cocalos stood on her feet, her breast shaking in her passionate rage.

"Speak not of honor, O Minos! Though I am but a woman and one you consider a barbarian, I am well acquainted with the secrets of your royal heart, for Daidalos, wisest of men, has enlightened me. Why are you here? Why did you not go yourself to lay waste the city of Theseus? Neither revenge nor your daughter lies dearest to you, king of the seas, for you are cold and calculating and ruled not by the desires that govern other men, but by fear. You fear that with the wise Daidalos to instruct us in your arts the Sikels shall grow to be as great a people as yours. And so we shall."

"So shall you not," the Minos answered in his kingly pride. "Daidalos dies as soon as my bath is ended."

"Then never shall it be ended, O king!" cried the daughter of Cocalos and drew a bronze dagger from the folds of her skirt. And I rushed forward with naked sword, but before I could prevent the shameful deed, she had buried the dagger to its hilt in the back of the Minos.

Then with my sword I would have

slain the daughter of Cocalos, but that the Minos in his wisdom halted me. Well our lord knew that had I done this thing the people of Cocalos would kill all of Crete within the palace walls! The blood of my royal uncle reddened the waters in which he had bathed, and he spoke but weakly, for the woman's dagger had set free his spirit.

"Ion, to you I give the command of those I have brought from Crete. Bury me as becomes a king."

But no more could the Minos say, nor could he hear the oath I swore as I pulled the dagger from his back and held its red blade aloft as token by which to swear. I swore that I would serve him as faithfully in death as I had in life, and that my will should hence hold to no other purpose until my task was ended. And I called upon the Goddess to be my witness.

And the other nine who had come to Camicos swore likewise, dipping their bronze blades into the blood of kings. And the daughter of Cocalos crouched in terror against the wall, but I gave orders that none should harm her, for her hour had not yet come.

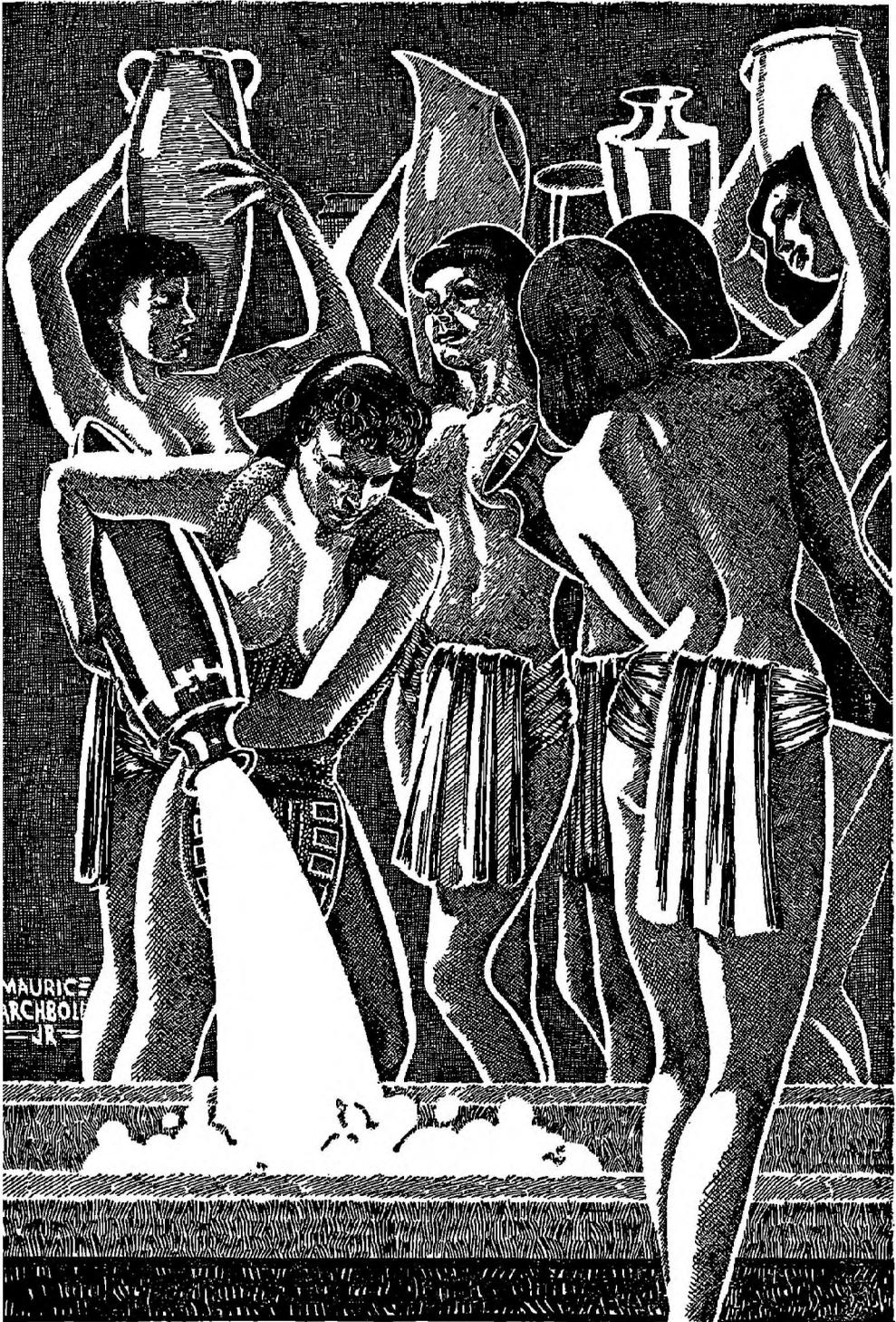
And Cocalos, seeing us standing with our red-tipped swords about the body of our leader, knew that the blame was his daughter's and spoke her sternly.

"You have done an ill deed, girl, and disgraced our royal house before these sons of Crete. Much blood will flow between us, I fear, before the quarrel is settled."

And the daughter of Cocalos wept, but could find no words with which to answer her father's wrath.

I PROTEST," said Cocalos to me, "that this was none of my doing."

"Well do I know that, king of the Sikels."



The maids bore in the tall clay vessels; and the daughter of Cocalos poured from them herself.
121

"How may I make amends to you for what my daughter has done?"

"By giving your daughter to us to be punished."

But Cocalos shook his head sadly, "That I may not do. Evil as her act has been, she is my daughter, and I may not give her up for others to punish."

"Then slay us now, king of the Sikels, while we are few and yours are many, for otherwise we shall not rest until the lord of the Double-Axe is avenged."

"No more guests shall be slain in this house," Cocalos answered proudly. "Let there be a truce between us until you have held the funeral of your king. Then it shall be for you of Crete to say whether there shall be peace or war between our nations. Is it agreed?"

"It is agreed," I said, and I took the hand he held out to me in token. No anger had I against this barbarian king, nor he anger against me, but blood had been shed, nevertheless, between his house and mine, and so were we of Crete compelled to strive with him. Thus does the Goddess move us all upon her great gaming board, we human pawns, nor is it possible for our dull minds to guess the design of her game.

And the truce was held, as the Sikel had promised, while we buried our great leader. And Cocalos himself took part in all of our ceremonies, for he grieved even as we. A pit did we dig, twice the height of a man, and at its base we hollowed a noble chamber. And inside we placed the Minos, in the very coffin in which he had lost his life since in all Sicilia there was no other to hold his bones. With him we placed his long sword and his shield and all the weapons that were his, and the rings upon his fingers and the orna-

ments he wore, save only his gold chain of fleur-de-lys and his green signet. These I kept to deliver to my cousin, the divine Ariadne, should the Goddess be kind and allow us to meet again in our homeland.

And in the noble chamber, hollowed from the stone, we placed also bronze vessels to the number of fourteen, bearing food and drink that our lord might refresh himself. And we placed within a fire of live coals to keep him warm and a lamp to light his way through the grievous darkness in which he must travel.

Then had we done all that could be done for him—save only one thing—and with stones we walled the entrance to his chamber and with dirt and stones filled the pit which led to it. And above the grave we erected a pillared shrine to the Goddess, that her presence might hover ever above him.

IN THE valley behind the hill overlooking our ships, we held the games in our lord's honor: foot-races and wrestling and boxing, contests of the bow and the spear. Pharos proved most skilled with the padded glove, and I, Ion, hurled the spear the farthest, though Deucalion could have beaten me easily. And in wrestling none was so powerful as King Cocalos: such strength has that barbarian that I do not believe that even Theseus—he whom I saw with my own eyes overthrow the Nubian wrestler—could stand before him.

But now of fresh deeds of evil do I write, for, behold, as we played at our games, one of us looked upward to see smoke rising over the crest of the hill to the south of us. And when we had gained the height, we saw that the flames arose from our ships, where

even now men were slaying the few guards we had left there.

"False you are!" I said angrily to Cocalos, "And I did ill to trust to your honor while we held our lord's funeral."

But he answered me fairly.

"This is not my doing, Prince Ion of the royal house. I gave orders to my subjects that there should be truce until after the funeral. He who has done this thing shall be punished by death, and I myself will help you take him."

So we raced down the hill to the sea, but were too late in arriving, for all had fled and the galleys were burning fiercely. Quickly did we bring water and quench the flames, but they were so damaged that only one was fit for the sea. And our guards were dead, but in one enough life remained to tell us that it had been the work of Daidalos, who had led a party of men recruited for him by the daughter of Cocalos to do this evil thing.

Much do we owe to that treacherous pair, but so far they have escaped us, for Cocalos will not suffer his daughter to be punished. Daidalos he would yield us gladly, for he is wroth with the man who set at naught his kingly honor, but the knave fled and has concealed himself so cunningly that even the king of the Sikels cannot find him. But I doubt not that the daughter of Cocalos is well acquainted with his whereabouts.

A cunning artificer does that fierce girl love! In Crete Daidalos won great renown, and would have won more had

he chosen to live honestly. Now is he as the boar we hunt in the woods, and as the boar shall be slaughtered. Some say the man is mad, and perhaps he is, but, mad or sane, his design to sunder us from our homeland lacked only one galley of complete success.

Yet is that one galley as good to us as twenty, since I have sent it over the sea, in command of the officer Pharos, to bring word to my brother Meriones. As I have sworn, so will swear Meriones, and Deucalion, too, if he returns alive from Athens, and soon shall Crete muster all of her might to avenge the death of her monarch.

And welcome such aid will be, for we are too few now to storm the heights of Camicos. Too few we are to do aught but defend ourselves behind the double walls of our stockade, which Daidalos did not take time to fire, so bent he was on making an end to our noble ships.

The Sikels attack us daily, but always we beat them off with heavy losses, for our swords are longer, our spears sharper, and our bows better than theirs, thanks to the wisdom of my great uncle's policy. Yet each attack leaves us the fewer.

And the men the Sikels slay cannot be replaced, while the barbarians daily grow stronger, since the whole island is rallying to the support of its king. And what our end will be—

The alarm sounds. Already the Sikels attack again.

(Here the tablets end abruptly.)

New readers frequently ask if back numbers of Golden Fleece can be had. Yes, send 20c for each copy you desire—October, November, December, January, February, March, and April—to Golden Fleece, 538 So. Clark St., Chicago, Ill.

The Thin Red Line

by ROBERT JAMES GREEN

CAVALRY trumpets blasted "Boot and Saddle" into the dawn of July 8, 1874. A sentry opened the stockaded gates of stone Fort Dufferin on the Red River.

Two half-breed guides on Indian ponies trotted out, followed by fifty red-jacketed riders. Field gun limbers swung into line. More troops. Eighty clumsy prairie schooners. C troop; white helmets and pillbox caps setting off red tunics. Behind them creaked one hundred and fourteen Red River ox-carts. D troopers on grays. A herd of cattle, horses and a few mowing machines followed. Then a rearguard of troopers. Flanker scouts outrode each side. Black jack-boots glistened and spurs flashed in the sun.

The first of the Royal North West Mounted Police were on their way west.

Their job: to ride into thirty thousand square miles of wilderness inhabited only by murderous renegades and howling savages, and stamp out a lawless situation rapidly becoming serious.

Hundreds of fierce experienced warriors of Sitting Bull's American Sioux had crossed the Canadian border and were scalping and threatening far and wide. Murder and horse-stealing were the vogue. Guerilla bands of discharged Civil War soldiers, carrying poisonous whiskey and repeating rifles for trade, had penetrated into the Canadian Indians' richest hunting grounds, the Cypress Hills. Crazed by whiskey, the Indians were easily robbed. With firearms they were killing each other wholesale.

Farther west, whiskey traders had even built a palisaded fort and had

brought whiskey and guns to demoralize the sturdy Blackfeet. The traders swore to kill every trooper.

Such was the job faced by the handful of mounties, hundreds of miles from communications, supply base or reinforcements; a job of policing the west that had already cost the United States millions of dollars.

Assured that the mounties would travel in mufti and unarmed, they were granted permission to travel through the United States to the end of steel at Fargo. From there they hit the old Red River trail, one hundred and eighty miles north to Fort Dufferin. A few days later a rider galloped in on a spent horse to give the mounties one of their first jobs. A Sioux war party were scalping Dakota settlers.

A troop of red-coats saddled and rode back into the United States. A Sioux scout saw them coming and gave the alarm. The Indians quickly stopped their scalp-lifting and vanished before the thin red line.

FROM Dufferin the flaming expedition cut westward over the plains where there was no semblance of a trail. Nearly every night of the first week saw rain, lightning and mosquitoes start the horses off in a wild stampede.

In the upper Souris Mountains a gigantic cloud of locusts dropped on the outfit, devouring canvas, clothing and wood and stripping bare every stem of green forage for miles. The eastern horses began to play out. Clouds of mosquitoes, night and day, set men and horses frantic and killed colts and calves.

In three weeks the column covered only two hundred and seventy-five miles. Already game birds headed south and cool nights hinted of autumn. At this rate of traveling with cripples, winter would catch them in the open prairie instead of the wooded Porcupine foothills of the Rockies.

With a slim chance of getting through and no retreating, Inspector Jarvis volunteered to take A troop, fifty-five sick horses, a few wagons and carts and the cattle and machinery. With a makeshift map they headed across the trackless northwest to Fort Edmonton, eight hundred and seventy-five miles distant. For nearly three months this troop fought hunger, thirst, snow and mud. Carts repeatedly broke down. Horses, cattle and guns mired in the muskeg. Troopers had to thrust poles under the helpless animals and lift them bodily. This kept up right to the gates of Fort Edmonton.

JULY 29th the main caravan left Pierced Rock. At Wood End they had to camp and rest for three days before tackling the Dung Hills. Once a fine buffalo hunting ground, the hills were now a vast barrenness, burnt black by prairie fires, eaten by grasshoppers, covered with buffalo bones.

The course was entirely by compass. Men became lost. Officers sent up sky-rockets at night to guide lost ones to the train. Field guns stuck in the muddy slopes. To extricate them often required twelve horses and as many men and officers with shoulders to the wheels.

With dogged courage they crossed dangerous rivers lined with quicksand. The half-breed guides and drivers proved treacherous and deceptive, but even they were lost. Mirages constantly

deceived the men. Sagebrush was the only greenery on the blackened earth. The sun burned like a copper ball in a cloudless sky. No moving thing broke the monotony.

On August 8, Old Wive's Lake was sighted. From an old Sioux camping ground the troops became infested with lice. The half-breeds showed the trick of turning shirts inside out and throwing them on ant hills. A Cripple Camp was established for twenty-six horses and five men. The main body again pushed on into the wilderness of sagebrush and buffalo grass.

September 1, they skirted the Cypress Hills where Mandans, Crees, Blackfeet and Sioux hunted. Woe to any settlers or small party that ventured to trespass. The mounties saw and tasted their first buffalo. As far as the eye could see, black, shaggy animals moved southward. The fresh meat came just in time for the troops were starving.

A few days later found them in the heart of the flat, treeless prairies, with no buffalo, no water, nor horsefeed. They had dragged on for nine hundred miles. Cold weather began in earnest. With each sleet storm, more horses dropped, never to get up. The Blackfeet kept strangely out of sight, although this was their country.

All water sloughs had dried up. The buffalo had apparently gone south. The outfit moved like lost souls in a silent, deserted world.

The men gritted their teeth and held on. In the cold and dark outlook ahead the morale of the force was welded; a morale and pride that was to carry on and establish one of the world's finest traditions for never giving up in the face of desperate odds.

The cold increased. Snow clouds

banked in the sky. Men shared blankets with their horses, but the horses continued to die.

FAR to the south the men could see the tips of the Three Buttes in the Sweetgrass Hills where there would be plenty of forage. Two hundred miles beyond the Buttes was American Fort Benton at the head of Missouri River navigation. There would be precious flour. It was decided to swing the wagon train southward into the Sweetgrass country.

Almost barefoot, freezing in rags of summer uniforms, chewing harness straps, digging roots and grasses, walking and pulling their weakened animals, the mounties finally entered lush grazing lands.

The two commanding officers, Colonels French and McLeod, rode south to Fort Benton to buy supplies. They arrived back just in time. With them as a guide to assist the force, came the finest half-breed scout in the west, Jerry Potts. He led them up Old Man River to the foothills where three troops began building shelters. Patrols began, and the whiskey traders felt for the first

time the law's iron hand as represented by the indomitable courage and hardness of the mounties.

Four feet of snow fell and the troopers were still in tents. Forty-five men were sick in one day. Clothes wore out. Sentries took turns tying buffalo robes around bodies and legs while trudging drifts in twenty-below weather.

It was the kind of fortitude needed when, two years later, Sitting Bull and his fiercest braves fled to Canada and tried to intimidate the mounted police.

Like many another famous leader, Colonel French not only had to fight constant hardship with inexperienced troops, but scurrilous eastern newspapers and politicians as well; enough to discourage anyone. It speaks for his leadership that not a life was lost.

He and his men had traveled a hostile wilderness. By conquering the trackless, barren prairies, the "horse-soldiers'" daring won the respect of the Blackfeet, proudest and hardiest of all the northwest tribes. This laid the cornerstone of the foundation for the force's future success and began a new chapter in Canadian history.



NEXT MONTH

JOHNSTON McCULLLEY

(Author of *The Mark of Zorro*)

BRINGS US

GUARDIAN DEVIL

A FAST-MOVING ROMANCE OF OLD SANTA FE



The Round Table



AN OPEN FORUM FOR OUR READERS

What to do? Only two pages for the Round Table this month and literally dozens of letters. First let Gilbert Eldredge defend himself:

I notice that Mr. Morris of Los Angeles takes issue with the Spanish in *MOJAVE GUNPOWDER*. I'm afraid that Mr. Morris confuses modern Mexican with the old Spanish used by the early Californios. Not only was the locale checked with old records and the Spanish old timers but the language also. In addition a Spanish professor, himself a Spaniard and a graduate of the Madrid Language School, went over the Spanish phrases. Mr. Morris forgets, perhaps, that both the idioms and spelling change to some extent with the times.

At any rate, everybody agrees that it was a fine story, and our friends did tinker with the Spanish. Now let's pick on artists:

The illustration for *THE GOLDEN HOUR OF GUCHEE* had the quivered arrows upside down. The warrior would have torn his hand all to pieces.

Walter Claremartin.

The quality of your fiction is distinctly above the average of the pulp magazines. I gather from your comments that you are trying to set a standard of historical accuracy. May I suggest that you apply the same standard to your illustrations. This you have failed grotesquely to do in the illustrations on page 109 of February and page 77 of March *GOLDEN FLEECE*, both of which depict a long bladed knife being held in combat with the blade at the little finger side of the hand instead of in the sword grip with the blade at the thumb side.

I have seen many hundreds of American

Indians use knives in work, butchering and hunting, and have seen them vividly depict combat and scalping in tribal dances or exhibitions for visitors. I never saw or heard of an Indian using a knife as your artist shows him. I once saw an Indian in Oklahoma, patronizingly and rather rudely, change the knife grip of a white "politico" who was going through a tribal dance for publicity and tribal adoption, and who had grasped the knife as shown by your illustrator so inaccurately.

In a grapple such as your artist shows, the man using the knife grip of your artist would be helpless while the man with the sword grip would be able to cut his opponent's arms, and free himself very quickly. It is almost impossible to grasp the wrist of a hand having the sword grip, while the stiletto or woman's grip shown by your artist is readily pinned and controlled.

Any soldier or frontiersman who has lived in a country where knives are used as weapons, would laugh heartily at these absurd illustrations. *Col. George Chase Lewis, Overseas Discharge and Replacement Depot, Brooklyn, N. Y.*

Jay Jackson will have to get out in the open spaces and learn how to handle some of these weapons. Till then, if he gets hurt it serves him right. Other artists take notice. We tried both grips on letter-openers and Col. Lewis is undoubtedly right. No casualties. L. Sprague de Camp brings up a long debated point with:

Your latest G. F. has some good yarns in it. But can't you crack down on authors who insist on having characters who in life would have talked ancient Babylonian, An-

glo-Saxon, etc., talk Elizabethan English, complete with thou werts and he goeths? As long as their remarks have to be translated anyway, why not into modern English?

Any echoes? It is a difficult question. How can we give the atmosphere of other times in strictly modern English? As a matter of fact, Elizabethan English, undiluted, would be strong medicine for most of us, and we have heard that a Georgian in Lancashire today might find an interpreter useful.

BARD OF BABYLON, in my humble opinion, is something of a sensation. A. Westcott McKee is a rare find, and I sincerely hope you will print more of his stories. THE BARD is a remarkably vivid and well told story. Mr. McKee's classic style is refreshingly different and highly entertaining. I felt as though I were right on the scene. Thank goodness for a little research and thought.

Congratulations on your splendid magazine. You're making a really worthwhile contribution to the American pulp field, which is far too overrun with cheap and trite junk.

*A. Hamson,
Los Angeles, Cal.*

For the first time I have found, and read, a copy of GOLDEN FLEECE. It's a grand getaway from life into something that is really different from the run-of-the-mill magazines. The past is thrilling to most of us, and I enjoyed it most in such stories as BARD OF BABYLON, THE FIRE MASTER, and FROM BEYOND THE HAZY SEA. The illustrations are fine. All in all, it's good.

*Robert A. Graham,
Lakeland, Fla.*

Hello again—My, my—most all the stories in the March issue were tops. I can name them only in order of the impression they made on me. BARD OF BABYLON with its quick witted Ardavan—one can almost see Errol Flynn cavorting across the screen in that role. Next in line, THE FIRE MASTER. El Tigre is one smart person and the charming Elsa a clever young woman. Bedford-Jones next with intrigue in the South Seas, and its hero Nureddin. Quite a bit different from what I've read in some time. RED HAIR AND REDSKIN and GRAAH, FOILER OF DESTINY, tie for fourth place. The Miscellaneous department continues fascinating and informative. THE STONE SHIP was of particular interest.

Anonymous, Chicago.

Is there any possibility of seeing any more of the late Robert E. Howard's work in your book? He was in a class by himself. Also glad to see Seabury Quinn's El Tigre back. He was quite a character back in the days of Magic Carpet. The Spider Woman, I think it was, was one of the best stories I ever read. Gripping—I still read it. BARD OF BABYLON in March was also good. Keep your novels on these history incidents of the far past. And let them run crimson gore, with flashing, spark-flying scimitars, wielded by the strong arms only a Howard could create.

*Albert J. Mann,
Philadelphia, Pa.*

Mr. Mann may look forward to pleasant surprises. He brings to mind the comments of Victor C. Ferkiss of South Ozone Park, N. Y.:

One thing you don't have to worry about—you haven't readers telling you they've followed the mag for sixty years and it gets worse and worse, or readers demanding reprints and quarterlies. But there'll come a time, mark my words.

Sixty years from now—to the readers of that day the Ides of March 1939 may make a thrilling tale of what is heart-sickness and revulsion to the civilized world this day. Attila is the only Hun we can read about dispassionately. Mr. Ferkiss suggests stories about the Boer War, the early history and westward migration of the Magyars, and the cause of the desertion of Angkor-Vat.

Of course ask Mr. Bedford-Jones to tell the unfinished story of Nureddin the Nakoda. These things are excellent and quite different.

*Thomas P. Wilson,
Segundo, Colo.*

I am writing this, my first message to any publication, to tell you that GOLDEN FLEECE, in my opinion, and I am sure many others agree, is the most successful experiment in the pulp field. I have read it ever since it first appeared. Please continue the story of Nureddin by H. Bedford-Jones. BARD OF BABYLON was great. Keep up the good work.

*Lazarus L. Pertulis,
Paterson, N. J.*

Tom L. Mills of Feilding, New Zealand, says, "The stories of H. Bedford-Jones always attract my keen attention," and wishes us "Kia Ora! (Which is Maori for Good Luck!)"

Coincidence Department: Lieut. Colonel Harwood Steele, M.C., F.R.G.S., Commanding 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars, and author of IN THE MOUTH OF A CANON, is the son of the famous Major-General Sir Sam Steele of the "Mounties," who was one of THE THIN RED LINE.

Enjoy **BEAUTIFUL**
Natural-Looking
FALSE TEETH

LOWEST PRICES
SEND NO
MONEY



60
Days
Trial



Let 1939 Bring You Mouth-Comfort!

FIT-RITE TEETH BY MAIL

We make to measure, to fit you individually — BY MAIL the World's No. 1 FIT-RITE Dental Plates for men and women — from an impression of your mouth. We have thousands of satisfied customers all over the country wearing high-grade teeth we made by mail at sensible prices. That is the pleasant economical way you want.

AT ROCK-BOTTOM PRICES

We stick to depression's lowest prices. If you have ever bought false teeth before, or if you find out what others have paid for theirs, you will be astounded when you see how little ours will cost you! By reading our catalog, you will learn how to save half or more on dental plates for yourself. Try "A-1" teeth at prices you can afford to pay.

ON 60 DAYS' TRIAL

Make us prove you can't beat our fit, price, work or material. Wear our teeth on trial for as long as 60 days. Then, if you are not perfectly satisfied with them, they will not cost you a cent. But if you are delighted with the fit and your improved looks, tell your friends and relatives. We build our business on satisfied customers everywhere. Monthly payments possible. So don't wait.

WITH MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

No money need be risked. We guarantee that if you are not completely satisfied with any teeth we make for you; then, any time within 60 days, we will immediately refund every cent you have paid. We take your word.

Try
FIT-RITE
TRADE MARK REGISTERED
False Teeth

TO EAT WITH PLEASURE . . . TO LAUGH HEARTILY . . . TO LOOK YEARS YOUNGER . . . TO GUARD YOUR HEALTH . . . TO SPEAK DISTINCTLY . . . TO ENJOY LIFE!
QUIT wearing teeth that clack; that constantly slip off your gums; that broadcast their glaring falseness to the world every time you open your mouth. Life is too short, health too precious, looks are too important! For looks, health and comfort—PREFER FIT-RITE FALSE TEETH!

Our dentures are set with life-like, pearly-white, genuine, porcelain teeth; constructed from finest materials, with expert workmanship, to give life-long service. We make all styles of plates. A dentist who has had many years' experience in making and fitting dental plates, that look right and fit right, supervises all work.

FREE Impression material, catalog with new low prices and easy directions.
CLIP COUPON OR WRITE—A one cent postal with your name and address will do.

← The only place you can obtain FIT-RITE FALSE TEETH →
We also repair and reproduce old plates—48 hour service.

UNITED STATES DENTAL COMPANY
THE WORLD'S LARGEST LABORATORY MAKING DENTAL PLATES ONLY

Exclusive makers of FIT-RITE False Teeth—C. T. Johnson, Pres.
1555 MILWAUKEE AVE., DEPT. 5GF, CHICAGO, ILL.

PROOF!

Thousands of grateful letters come to us unsolicited.

100% SATISFIED

Gentlemen: "I am 100% satisfied with my teeth. They fit perfectly. I will at any time recommend your Company." A. J. Prizeman, Regina, Sask., Canada.

FIT AND COMFORT

Gentlemen: "I feel that I owe you a few lines of praise. This is the fourth plate I have worn in 37 years and must say it is the first one that I ever had that fits exactly. I never have them out of my mouth except while cleaning them." Mrs. P. L. Stevens, De Pauw, Indiana.

A BEAUTIFUL SET

Gentlemen: "Received my set . . . this morning . . . material is beautiful; workmanship excellent and a fine fit . . . very well satisfied. Success to you in the future!" Iruel L. Hopkins, 10th Air Base, Rantoul, Ill.

REMARKABLE WORK BY MAIL

Gentlemen: "Received my dental plates. They could not fit any better . . . It is remarkable how you can make such fits through the mail." A. E. Clapp, Lipan, Texas.

Mrs. "A friend who has worked in a dental office for years looked at mine and said, 'You certainly have a good fit.'" G. E. Long, Noble, Okla.

Mrs. "It is the best-fitting set I have ever had and I have had several." H. M. Clark, Highland Park, N. J.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW

FREE UNITED STATES DENTAL COMPANY
1555 Milwaukee Ave., Dept. 5GF,
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Send, without obligation, your FREE impression material, catalog, and easy directions.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

(Print Clearly)

Is History a Jumble of Names and Dates to You?
Let **HISTOMAP** BRING YOU HISTORY at a **GLANCE**

The **HISTOMAP**

OF WORLD HISTORY

4000 Years of History on a Single Page

HISTORY, in the mind of the average person, is a jumble of names and dates, of battles, conquests and revolutions, each standing by itself and unrelated to the others.

The **HISTOMAP** brings order out of this confusion; gives you graphically in simple, understandable form the relation of contemporary events.

Vertical streams of color show by their varying width the rise and wane of world powers from 2000 B.C. down to our own times.

Brief accounts of historical events are printed on the map in a way that tells you what was happening all over the world **at the same time**.

With the **HISTOMAP** before you all of mankind's recorded history takes on a unity and vitality it never had before. Here is the actual picture of the **MARCH OF CIVILIZATION** from the mud huts of the ancients through the monarchistic glamor of the Middle Ages to the shifting sands of our own times.

Lowell Thomas says "HISTOMAP IS A MARVEL. I can hardly take my eyes away from those fascinating rivers of color."

SIZE 13x63 INCHES. LITHOGRAPHED BY
RAND McNALLY & CO. in EIGHT COLORS
\$1.00 POSTPAID

GOLDEN FLEECE, 538 SO. CLARK ST., **Chicago**

