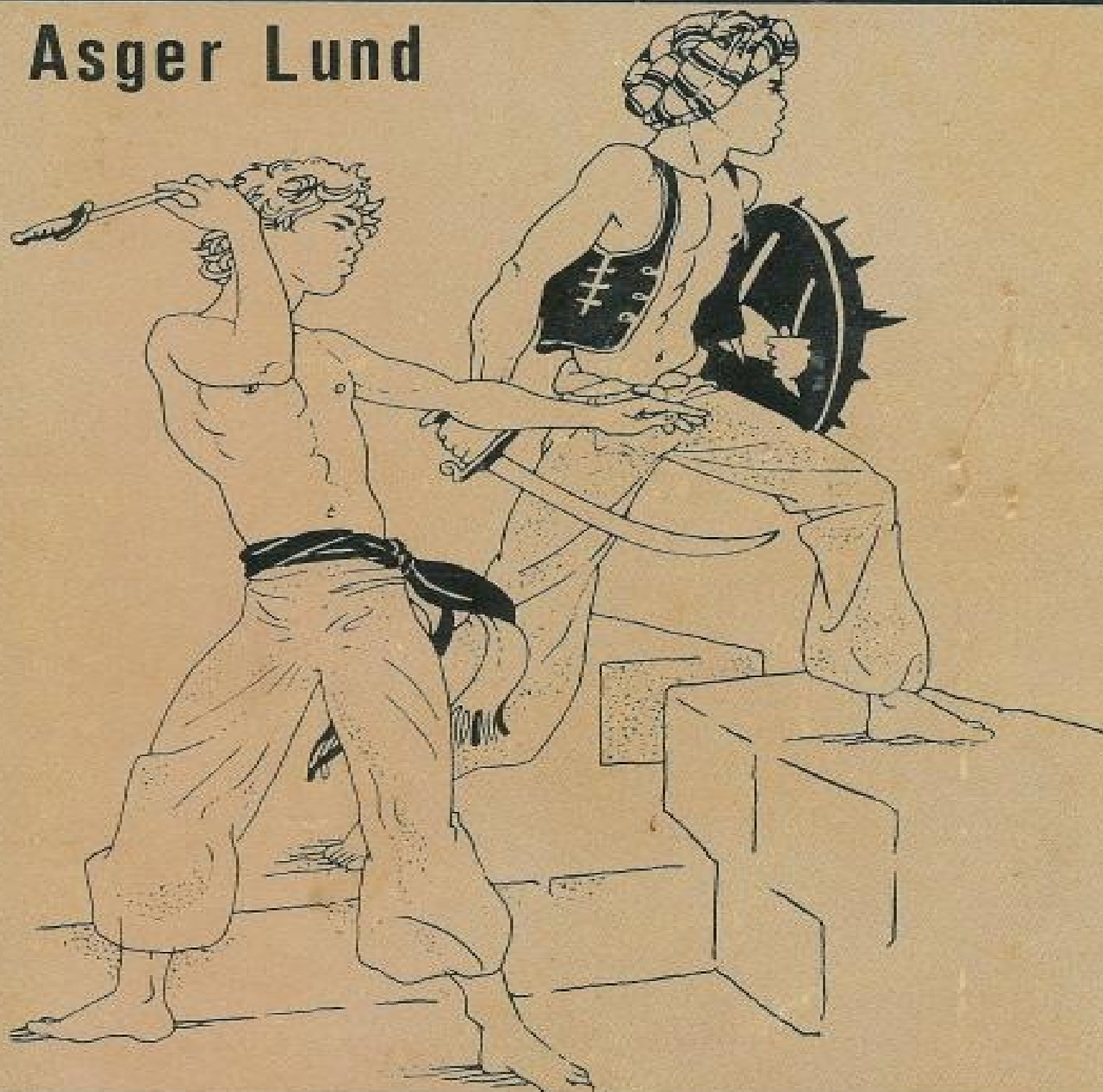


THE BOY AND THE DAGGER

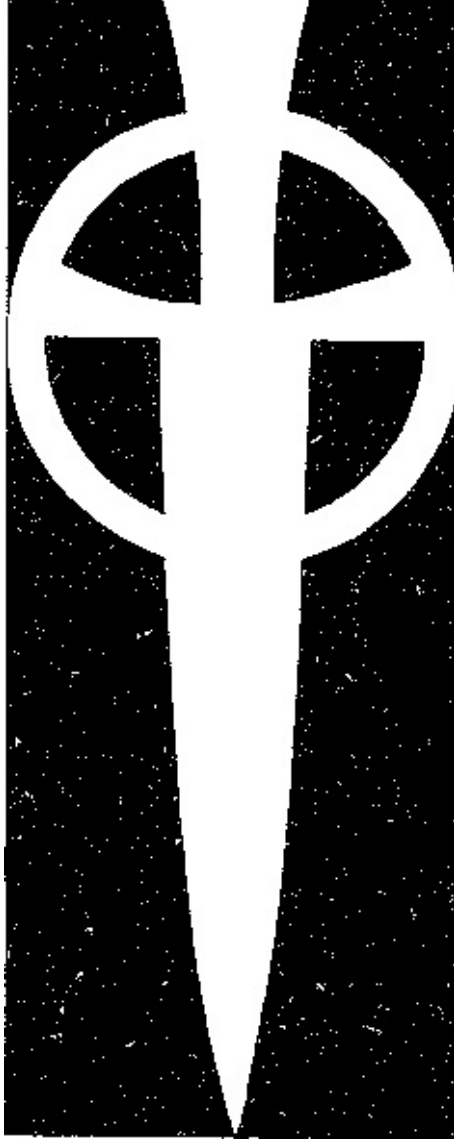
Asger Lund



a boy-love historical novel

The Boy and the Dagger

Asger Lund



a boy-love novel

Illustrated by Richard Steen

eBook by the Ghost

Spartacus, Amsterdam

Spartacus, P. O. Box 3496
1001 AG Amsterdam, The Netherlands

English text first published by Spartacus October, 1982

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Jacket illustration by Richard Steen
Jacket format design by Mario de Graaf

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Original Danish title: *Drengen og dolken*

Danish edition privately printed by D.F.T. (A. & E. Axcil), 1963

Phototypeset in The Netherlands by Spartacus Set in 10/11 Times Roman

Printed in The Netherlands by
Reproka bv, Amersfoort

ISBN 90 70154 18 8

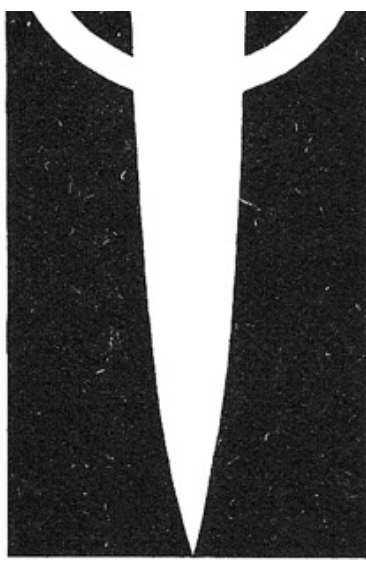
THE BOY AND THE DAGGER was originally written in Danish as *Drengen og dolken* in 1961, privately published in 1963 and translated into English by the author in 1979. At that time the accompanying illustrations by Richard Steen were drawn. The English version was somewhat expanded and revised in cooperation with Frank Torey in 1982, and that is the text which “appears in this edition.

Aside from Henry of Navarra, all the characters appearing in this book are creatures of the author's imagination: villains, peasants, innkeepers, lansquenets, pages and Arab warriors, none were even suggested by actual persons, living or dead. Likewise, the League of the Dagger, as far as is known, never existed, unfortunately for the subsequent history of our world.

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Murderer's Inn

On a June evening in 1592, as a full moon heaved itself above the North German plain, a horse and rider trotted along a deserted stretch of road. Man and beast pressed their pace, for the countryside hereabouts was rather dull and did not invite the kind of slow, reflective passage one makes through more gracious vistas. Perhaps, one might have speculated, the rider was getting hungry and his horse was hurrying toward some known stall for the night, a handful of oats and a bale of hay.

At first glance the rider would have looked rather harmless: a clean-shaven young man, slender, probably in his early twenties. He was dressed in a dark suit, suggesting that he might have been a clergyman, or a rather well-to-do student.

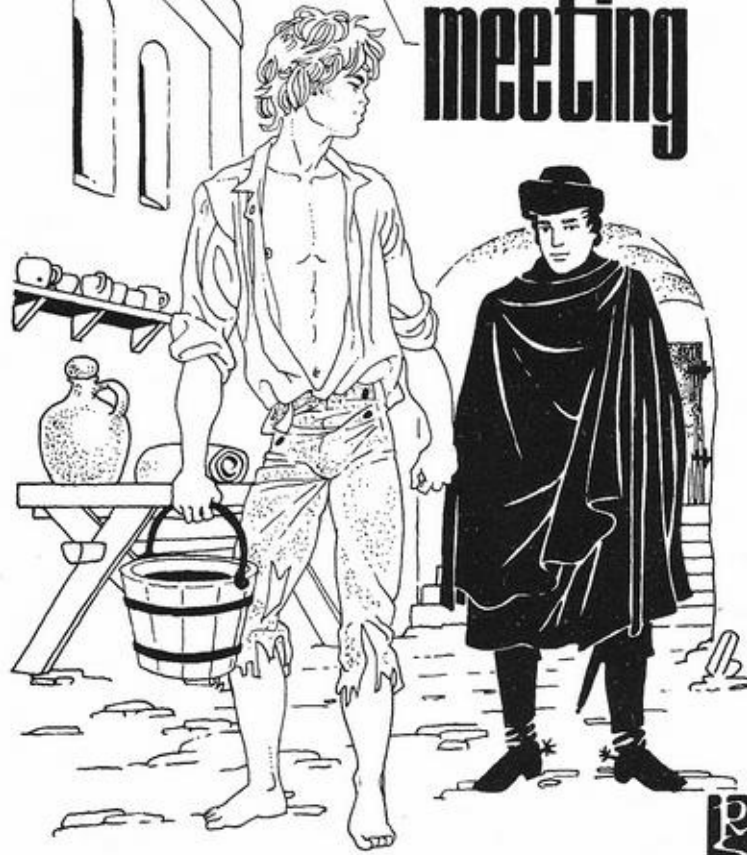
The attentive observer, however, would also have noticed that the young man was agile enough, rode his mount with easy grace, that his black cloak draped a well-tuned and apparently muscular body. His eyes especially would have belied the initial clerical impression: sharp, restless, intelligent and proud, set in a youthful but tanned and weather-creased face.

Not far away could be seen the lighted windows of Steindorph, a small village distinguished only from others along the Magdeburg Road by the presence of a wayside inn. This hostelry had recently come on hard times, due to the dangers of travel which then prevailed in most parts of Europe, and it had now acquired for itself a rather dubious reputation. People who could not defend themselves with sword or hired retainers often went some distance out of their way to avoid the Steindorph inn.

It seemed, however, that the rider either did not know about the Steindorph inn or felt confident enough in himself not to care, for, when he rode into the village a few minutes later, he dismounted before the old stone building, stretched with obvious physical pleasure, and gave his horse over to the stableman. Then he opened the door and walked in.

At first glance the place appeared deserted. The only signs of recent occupancy were two smoking torches which gave just enough light to let one avoid bumping into the rough tables and chairs which littered the room. At the sound of a foot scrape behind him the traveler whipped around, hand on his sword, but his hand fell to his side as he discerned in the gloom a young lad of about fourteen holding a wooden bucket. The boy looked at the stranger with frank curiosity; he seemed about to offer a gentle greeting when a rough voice from what seemed to be the kitchen snarled, "Back to work, you lazy rascal!"

The first meeting



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Quick as a weasel, the lad ran away and the proprietor, a sloppy, rather fat person in his middle years, came forth. Rider and innkeeper measured each other for a moment. Then the proprietor allowed a servile smile to spread across his features and asked, with extreme politeness, what he could do for his guest.

“A meal and a bed for the night,” the rider answered, letting a gold coin catch the light from the torches and the yellow glint reflect in the eyes of the other.

“Woman!” the fat man bellowed. “Dinner for the gentleman. Have Rudi prepare his quarters – and look smart about it!”

The traveler was shown to a seat at a large corner table in the tap room. There it was lighter. A goodly number of men were sitting about eating and drinking and talking in the hushed tones people use when they are suspicious of their neighbors. A few minutes later the lad reappeared carrying a dish of hot meat stew and vegetables. These the innkeeper served with a ceremoniousness they hardly warranted, but had a guest at the inn been one of the ubiquitous spies or political informers which plagued Europe in those years, and had he been curious about the traveler in black, he might have noticed that the young man was not so much listening to what the innkeeper was saying as casting his eye upon the supple figure of the servant boy. In fact, had his hearing been sharp, our hypothetical spy might even have heard the young man mutter under his breath, once the greasy food had been served and the proprietor had wandered off, “By God, a beauty! And in, this wretched place!”

For the boy was beautiful: blond curly hair, blue eyes which seemed to catch all the dim light of the tap-room, a spare but tightly muscled chest seen through a shirt open to his navel (because, evidently, its buttons had long ago been parted from it). The lad moved about the edges of the room, in the shadows, with pitchers of water and cider, alert to the needs of the other guests but observant, too, of the traveler at the corner table. Once or twice their glances met, and then our spy or informer might have heard the young man continue under his breath, “Yes, with a little expert attention and some new garments you might be a worthy page for Torben Lerche!”

The traveler in black finished his meal, took a last look at the handsome serving boy, then retired to his room, where he spent nearly an hour writing in a small book. He was just preparing to retire when there came a cautious knocking at his door.

“Who is it?” the traveler asked.

A light, pleasant voice answered in a whisper, “It's I, Rudi. I served you at your table. Your Lordship is in great danger.”

The young man quickly opened the door and the lad slipped in.

“In danger?”

The boy nodded. “My master” and here the lad made a wry face “saw your gold and he has sent for a couple of rough fellows of his own kind. They intend to kill you this evening and make you disappear without a trace.”

“Except for my gold, of course.”

The boy nodded. “Yes. It won't be the first time it's happened. I haven't been able to do anything about it because, well, I've been scared, and maybe I'm too young.”

“Why, then, are you warning *me*, my friend?”

“I did notice that your lordship regarded me with a certain kindness when I served you at your table, and smiled at me, even, once or twice, and then I found I was wishing you were my master, rather than that...” Here Rudi made a lewd gesture which left little doubt about how he regarded the owner of the Steindorph inn.

“I see,” the young man said. “How do we get out of here?”

“Sh, listen! I think....”

There was a creak of old boards giving under heavy bodies. Rudi pointed to the window. “There, my Lord,” he whispered. “It gives onto the kitchen roof, and then you can leap to the stables...”

“Good. You slip out and fetch a couple of horses...”

The boy's eyes lit up. “A *couple*?”

“I'll deal with these cut-throats while you make everything ready for a fast departure. Now, lad, hurry!”

Rudi ducked out the window; the traveler took up his rapier and wrapped his cloak around his left arm. He then snuffed out the candles with a couple of quick cuts of the sword and waited, in silence and darkness.

It would have taken sharp ears to have heard the quiet insertion of key in lock, the cautious turning of it. The door opened gently; three figures crept into the room and moved toward the bed. One of them carried a torch. Now its light glinted on hardened steel moving too swiftly to avoid. The rapier pierced the heart of one of the bandits even before he had a chance to be surprised.

The advantages were all on the side of the young traveler: surprise, sight adjusted to the darkness – and evidently a mastery of swordplay the men had not expected. Soon another of the ruffians lay dying on the floor and only the innkeeper himself remained to be dealt with.

“Sir,” the fat man began to blubber, “there has been some mistake....”

“Your only mistake was trying this on Torben Lerche.” “Torben Lerche!” The innkeeper's eyes grew big as gold sovereigns. “My Lord, if I had known....”

“You'd have murdered somebody else!” And he ran his rapier through the innkeeper's heart.

For almost a minute the young man stood still, listening, but all seemed quiet in the Steindorph Inn. Then he ducked through the open window and disappeared into the night.

Friendship of the Night

The name which had struck such surprise, and then terror, into the heart of the thieving innkeeper at Steindorph before cold steel had stilled it forever, and which certainly would have been recognized by any spy or informer observing the guests there, had become, in a short time, famous throughout all of northern Europe. Although only twenty-five years of age, Torben Lerche was probably the best swordsman in Germany. Despite his fame he always carried himself modestly and usually traveled alone. For a number of years he had been attached to the house of Magdeburg, and it was thence, in fact, that he had been making his way when the events just recounted took place.

Now he hurried through the inn yard to the stables and there found the worried boy holding the reins of two fresh horses. He slapped him on the shoulder. "Everything is going to be all right, now," he said. "Your master is dead and so are his thieving accomplices, but we must put distance between this cursed inn and ourselves."

"We?" the boy said hopefully.

"Mount up. Of course. You are a bright and clever lad, and you have saved my life as well. Whatever happens I am not likely to forget *that*."

They walked away from the inn, hands covering their horses' nostrils, but once they had put the village safely behind them they mounted, kicked the beasts into a trot, and for nearly an hour, as the cool mists gathered over the north German plain, pressed on in silence. At last, when Torben felt they were safe from any possible pursuers, he slowed to a walk and signaled Rudi to come up by his side.

"We must talk," he said. "I will tell you who I am and you must tell me about yourself. I hear in your speech an accent from the lands to the south and west. How did you come to be a servant boy in a Prussian inn?"

Rudi explained that he had never known his parents. From as far back as he could remember he had been taken care of by an old woman who had once been a servant at some castle in France. They had lived with a prosperous tradesman in Strasbourg, and there he had spent his childhood, tolerated by the tradesman's family, until the death of the old woman, whereupon he had been cast out and forced to fend for himself.

"So I left the city and crossed the Rhine and started walking. For a while I lived in the Black Forest. It was summer. There were fish in the stream, and hares I could snare, and on the trees there were nuts and in the woods berries. But one day a game-keeper caught me and thrashed me and I moved on to Bavaria. At one town I helped with the haying. For a while I worked for a shoemaker, but when he wanted me to do things I didn't want to do I moved on again. And then I came to Steindorph."

There he had been hired by the previous owner of the inn. But when Rudi was twelve the hostelry had been sold to their fat adversary of the night before, and then the hard times had really begun. He had been treated like a dog, underfed to the point where he had to eat left-overs from the plates of the dining guests. His clothes fell off his back. He was even without a pair of shoes. But all of this was insignificant beside the horror of the innkeeper's real profession: robbing and murdering his unsuspecting guests for whatever poor coins they had in their purses. Rudi had even had to help dispose of the bodies in the peat

bogs around Steindorph.

“Well, your fortunes have changed,” Torben said. “I take it you have no real prospects for the present.”

“My Lord, that is true.”

“Then you are in my employ until both you and I choose to terminate it. Is this to your liking?”

“Oh, yes,” the boy beamed.

“Take my hand and promise to be bright and obedient; then I'll pledge to take care of you as a nobleman should.”

Silently, almost solemnly, they shook hands, and, for the first time in years, the boy felt happy, and free.

By now the first streaks of morning were beginning to appear in the eastern sky. A single bird made a tentative chirp, its voice still a bit cracked from the mists of dawn. Presently it was joined by others and soon a whole chorus was jubilantly greeting the fresh rays of the newborn sun.

“Rudi, we must find a place to sleep. Perhaps the town ahead has a safer inn than the last one I tried. We need beds, and, for you, some new clothes and a bath.”

Rudi blushed and said, “I am so ashamed of how I look.” Robbed of the invisibility of night, he was now all too aware of his sorry appearance.

Within the hour they were at the city gates. The guard yawned and stretched and got up from the chair where he had been sleeping and looked at them inquisitively. They made an odd couple, a common, filthy, ragged lad with slightly foreign looks in the company of an undoubtedly distinguished young gentleman in simple clothing but with a professional soldier's sword at his side. These weren't the kind of travelers one expected to let into the city early on a June morning. Nevertheless he grumbled and opened the gates and, at Torben's inquiry, directed them to the town's best inn, *Zum Goldnen Stern*.

The contrast with the decaying inn at Steindorph couldn't have been greater. Bright, cheerful, with all the doors and windows thrown open to the spring sunlight and air, it reflected perfectly the personality of its owner and his wife.

“Greetings, my Lord and young master,” the innkeeper said. “Come in. Come in. You look travel-weary and hungry. Here, let me take the horses. Ask my wife what she can do for you.”

Torben gave the daughter of the house instructions for the purchase of garments suitable for a boy of fourteen, and then they were shown upstairs to a commodious corner room with two windows and an enormous bed capable of sleeping not just a man and his wife but the whole family as well. A few minutes of intense activity produced a large wooden tub and several buckets and pitchers of warm water.

“Now, Rudi,” said Torben, “you can take off those rags and throw them away forever. Climb in. I want to see what my new page is like underneath all that grime.”

The boy stripped, not at all ashamed of his nakedness but still humbled by his dirt, and crawled into the tub, and then the two of them went to work. Torben poured in warm water. He scrubbed the lad's back and worked the soap into his sodden locks. As the water turned black Rudi's skin lightened and his blond hair rinsed to a golden yellow. It was a quite different boy that stepped out of the tub, body dripping, hair still close about his head, and presented himself before Torben.

“You look even better than I'd imagined,” Torben said. Rudi blushed. “I'm very happy that you like me.” He dropped to his knees and, bending his head, grasped Torben's hand and kissed it.

“Little Rudi, get up,” Torben said, touched by the boy's impulsive gratitude. “Come. We must get you dry.”

There was a knock on the door. The daughter had returned to the inn with Rudi's new clothes; she

brought them in and laid them out on the bed as Torben was toweling Rudi's hair.

“For the boy,” she said, then her eyes grew big: they had dropped to the lad's root of masculinity still enlarged a bit from the sensuous feelings of the bath. Torben winked at her. Rudi blushed, and she was gone.

What a change had come over the lad when at last he was dressed! Now he looked a proper page, traveling with his master.

“One thing more,” Torben said. He fetched from his leather bag a beautiful dagger. Its blade was of the hardest steel, its handle of a bright golden alloy in which, here and there, a tiny jewel was embedded.

He handed it to Rudi, saying, “I give this to you as a small reward for your help last night. It is an heirloom in my family; my father gave it to me years ago with the same words I say to you now: 'Take this dagger and use it with good sense in the defense of your friends and your own honor. And should you wish to give it away, then present it to someone who is worthy of it in honor, achievements and honesty.'”

Almost too moved to speak, Rudi whispered his thanks and pressed the beautiful weapon to his chest. Torben took it from his hands and helped him place it at his belt, and as he did he noticed tears in the lad's blue eyes.

The degripping of Rudi



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“Your lordships have had a difficult journey?” the innkeeper politely inquired when they took their places downstairs before a simple but deliciously savory meal.

“You might say that,” Torben replied. “We rested at the Steindorph inn and were lucky to come away with our lives.” And he told his host, briefly, what had happened and assured him that the thieving proprietor there had done his last evil deed.

“Ah, now, if only our country could be rid of the likes of Marcel Lepreaux,” the landlord said.

At the name of Lepreaux, Torben stiffened and looked sternly at his host. “What do you know of that man?” he inquired. “Is he hereabouts? I thought he operated mostly in France.”

“Yes, my Lord. I believe he is at Felsen now.”

“That is bad news indeed.”

“May I be permitted to ask who your lordship might be, or do you travel incognito?”

“No, I am Torben Lerche. I make no secret of my identity. “

“But I am an admirer of yours. I shall always remember that you have been my guest...”

“How greatly you are respected!” Rudi exclaimed when they were once again upstairs in their own quarters. There all had been made ready for their rest: the tub had disappeared, the large bed prepared for Torben, while just inside the door a bench had been set up for Rudi, for it was the custom in those days for pages to guard the entrance to whatever room their masters slept in.

Rudi was already undressing, having placed his dagger under the head of his bench and made sure that the door was properly locked and bolted.

All of this Torben observed, and approved. “Rudi,” he said, stripping off his doublet, “tonight you need not sleep on that hard bench. I shall give you a choice. The bed is soft and certainly big enough for just the two of us. You may share it with me. On the other hand, if you prefer to maintain the correct distance between master and page, you are free to do that, too.”

Rudi looked at Torben seriously for a moment, then he smiled and said, “Thank you very much. With your permission I shall share your bed.”

By now Torben was lying naked between the sheets.

Rudi stepped to the window and drew the curtains to keep out the sunshine. Then he turned back, beaming, and crawled in beside his master.

The happiness Rudi felt at that moment was almost more than he was able to control. Sensing something accepting in the quiet body at his side, he turned with a sudden affectionate gesture and rested his head on Torben's chest. He felt the fingers of his master come into his hair and begin to roam through his unruly curls, then explore, with amazingly sensitivity for a professional swordsman, the features of his face: his closed eyes, his nose, his half-parted lips.

Without words, man and boy, master and page, slipped deeper into each other's embrace, warm skin sliding over warm skin, limbs tangling and interlocking, until at last their lips met, at first tentatively, then warmly and hungrily, to draw from each other kiss after sweet kiss.

One of Torben's hands strayed down between their two bodies and grasped the hard root of the boy's need.

“Now you really are mine, little Rudi,” Torben whispered. “Have you ever had an encounter like this before?”

Rudi shook his head.

“Not even with your own fist?”

“Well, that, of course. And there was another young boy at Steindorph whom I met sometimes in his father's hay-loft, and then we, well, just with our hands....”

“But no one has taken you here?” Torben said, as his fingers glided between the boy's twin globes.

“Are you sufficiently fond of me to allow a love-making there?”

Rudi hugged him hard and, snuggling against Torben's neck, whispered, “You may love me any way you wish.”

“I shall try not to hurt you.”

That had, in fact, happened to him in the past – not often but memorably, and not at all with his consent. His former master had forced him to please an occasional guest. The first time it had hurt terribly and he would have screamed, except that his face had been pressed into a pillow and it was all he could do to breathe. Later it was more his pride and his honor that had hurt. He didn't mention any of this to Torben, however. He simply said, “With you I don't think it will hurt at all.”

Their lips came together once again. Their eager caressing and shallow thrusting brought their feelings higher and higher – and closer to the inevitable explosion.

When at last their excitement became unbearable, Rudi rolled over to accept, with groaning delight, Torben's rigid shaft deep in his body, and then they united in joyous shouts and violent movements until they both were emptied.

Tired, satisfied at last, exhausted by the events of the night before, their long ride and the concentrated intensity of their love-making, they fell quickly asleep, Rudi once again resting his head on Torben's strong chest and his hand grasping protectively and in pride that prized part of his master's body which had just entered him so deeply and brought him so great a delight.

The Conspiracy

The sun had only slightly passed the noon meridian when the innkeeper, as requested, knocked upon their door. Torben Lerche was awake at once but remained abed for a few minutes looking with quiet happiness at the curly head slumbering at his side. It had been a long time since he had known such joy as this boy had brought him a few hours earlier. Now he remembered the first time it had happened to him, when he had been no older than Rudi was himself.

Torben had been born to a noble family long established in Sjeelland, Denmark, but his father had died when he was only ten; thereafter there had just been enough money to send him away to the famous Herlufsholm boarding school at Nrestved. He had been miserable at Herlufsholm, and one June day when he was fourteen he had run away to Copenhagen and there met the man who had caused that first joyous explosion with which his pubertal body had celebrated its coming of age – and which, in its repetition, ultimately forged the great friendship of his life. It was toward this man, in fact, that he was hastening today.

Now, ten years later, it was Torben who was the discoverer, and Rudi the discovered. How far their rough-and-ready friendship would lead him he didn't know, but he was astonished at how deeply he had come to feel about this boy in something less than twenty-four hours.

Rudi stirred. One eye opened and he looked about him, momentarily disoriented and bewildered. Then he saw Torben; a smile of sleepy recognition brightened his features. He snuggled into his master's embrace and sought with his hand the root he had relinquished in his sleep.

"We had better rouse ourselves, Rudi," Torben said, "and get something to eat. I should very much like to reach Magdeburg before evening."

"But, my Lord," said Rudi, squeezing, "what about this?"

They dallied a little longer in bed, kissing, whispering, teasing and ultimately satisfying their passions in a more simple embrace than they had sought the night before.

And so, an hour later, in the clearest of Spring weather, they set out on their horses once again along the road to Magdeburg. The time passed quickly; they chatted about this and that, told stories, leaving the more important revelations about themselves for a time of greater intimacy. They discovered they had a common love of song. Torben taught Rudi *The Fisherman's Son*, a sad madrigal for two voices about a boy drowned at sea but whose ghost kept coming back to fill his father's nets. Rudi remembered an old mock-tragic troubadour chanson about a very unhappy swan who had been ignominiously plucked, cooked and was being served at banquet. Torben had a strong baritone; Rudi sang with a light tenor which could still break into treble when necessary, especially for comic effect.

And so they rode on, amidst laughter and song. Peasants sometimes paused in their work and smiled as the two voices floated over the fields, parts twining and interweaving and then fading with the sound of horses' hooves into the distance. Late afternoon found Rudi and Torben riding through the eastern gate of the fortifications surrounding the city of Magdeburg.

"At last," Torben said, and he pointed ahead of them.

"There is the castle, and there our voyage ends. When we present ourselves, and when we are inside,

you must simply follow my lead and act as though nothing special has happened. Let me warn you, however, that the duke, and perhaps some others in the castle, too, may look at you with a little more curiosity than you might expect.”

His Highness the Duke of Magdeburg-Saale was a stately man in his mid-thirties, a little taller than average, with an aristocratic, handsome face, well-trimmed hair and beard and an athletic body clad in stylish, close-fitting court dress. He received Torben and Rudi in his private study, a room furnished with the most exquisite treasures from Italy: a Florentine chest, a table from Milan, a bust by Della Robbia and a Cellini clock. Although Duke Franz seemed to Rudi to be serious, even severe, in his demeanor, his face broke into a broad smile as soon as he saw Torben.

“I’m so happy that you made it in time, dear Torben,” he said. “Were you able to settle that matter satisfactorily?”

“To all concerned,” Torben answered. He pulled from his doublet a sealed letter and gave it to the duke. “There was an heir to the estate who was most helpful.”

The duke eagerly broke open the envelope and began to read, at the same time asking, “This heir, he was old enough to be accountable?”

“His voice had broken.”

“Just?”

“Just. The sword-work I do in your service isn’t all performed with cold steel.”

“Very good,” Duke Franz said at length. “My most heartfelt thanks, Torben. Only you could have solved this problem. You surprise me nonetheless,” he added with a smile toward Rudi. “You always claim that he who travels alone travels with greatest speed and safety, yet this time, having just quit the accountable heir with the just-broken voice, you arrive with a young boy looking very much the devoted page. What is your name, lad?”

Rudi had been standing at a respectful distance but listening to all of this with great interest. Now he stepped forward and said deferentially, “My name is Rudi, Your Highness.”

“Best compliments, Torben. Your taste does you credit.”

Torben told the duke of their chance meeting at the Steindorph inn and the happenings of the night before. Several times the duke nodded his approval, while studying the boy. Torben’s flattering account of Rudi’s part in their exploits brought a slight blush to the boy’s face. Recital had come to an end, “the tale grows better and better. Now, tell me, how closely are you bound together? With the ties of service or the ties of friendship?”

“Those of friendship,” Torben answered immediately. Duke Franz nodded. He placed a hand upon Rudi’s shoulder and said, “All of Torben’s friends are my friends, because in the whole world there are only five people in whom I have the same trust and confidence as I have in Torben Lerche. Our friendship is of the deepest kind imaginable. Be loyal and honest to him and you will always be able to count me among your friends and protectors. Now, Torben, you and Rudi had better leave for your rooms. We have many guests at the castle these days; there will be quite a crowd in the banquet hall tonight. And I have another task for you which we will discuss after the meal. I am going to make just one request at this point that you keep an eye on young Count Konrad of Felsen and tell me what you think of him. As you know, I greatly value your quick estimation of people met in casual encounters. Your task later will be to deal with the count, and the presence of Rudi here has suggested a solution to a problem which has troubled me for some time. But we’ll discuss this after dinner.”

A page appeared, a handsome young Provencal lad a year or so younger than Rudi, and led them to a suite of rooms not far removed from those of the duke. Rudi observed that Torben seemed to know the way well enough himself. Furthermore, once the page had bowed himself out of their presence and they

had closed the door behind him, Rudi realized that this was Torben's suite, that Torben's clothes and other personal articles were always kept ready for him in its closets and chests and this was as much of a home as his wandering master had anywhere in the world.

"I believe you are partly aware of the situation?" Torben asked.

Rudi looked at him gravely and nodded.

"The duke is my friend and protector, and I'm his special aid in all those difficult and secret affairs which he does not dare entrust to anyone else. And there is another matter which I had better explain to you, so that there is no misunderstanding in the future about my relationship with the duke."

Rudi felt a cold chill begin to steal around his heart.

What was his master saying? That he loved the elegant and powerful Duke Franz of Magdeburg-Saale? How could he, a poor boy of uncertain origin who, until the night before, didn't even own the poor rags that covered his body, measure up to such magnificence?

"Like you," Torben went on, "who are not only my page but also the one with whom I share my bed, so was I once both page and bed companion of my master. Now, Rudi, you needn't have gone so white. That was ten years ago when it began. I was your age, then, but I am a man, now, and he wouldn't find me interesting any longer to sleep with."

"Then you don't still love him?"

"Of course, I still love him, but not in the way you and I loved this morning at *Zum Goldnen Stern!*"

Forgetting for the moment that he was only a page, Rudi flew into Torben's arms and, excusing himself, buried his face in relief against his master's chest.

"I tell you this because you're soon going to notice that the duke's interest in handsome lads has not diminished over the years. In fact that was behind his question to me whether we maintained a servant or a friendship bond. If I'd told him you were just a hired retainer he would undoubtedly have expressed his interest in you in no uncertain terms. How did you like him, by the way?"

"He seems most friendly and very charming, even if he looks rather stern when he isn't talking to us. Yes, if I weren't yours already he might have been able to make me do all the wonderful things we do together, but that is too late now." And Rudi reached up and locked his arms about Torben's neck and gave him an ardent kiss on the mouth.

"Well," said Torben, pulling away at last, "we must get ready for the banquet tonight – there's not that much time, and we wouldn't want to look ignorant and sloppy."

Torben opened the closet. When Rudi saw all the court clothing, he gave a low whistle. He couldn't resist feeling the fabric and gazing at the rich colors. "But here," the boy said, having worked his way down to the far end of the closet, "what are these?"

Torben laughed. "My costumes when I was Franz's page."

Impulsively, Rudi pulled out one doublet of blue and gold and held it up before him. "You were no bigger than me!" he exclaimed.

"That's right."

"Were you very beautiful?"

"That you will have to ask Franz. But I know, with a little alteration, these costumes can be made to reflect the beauty of *my* page, provided he doesn't get a swelled head and start to act conceited."

"Oh, I'll never do that!" Rudi said, suddenly serious. "I shall never forget my origins, nor what you have done to better my circumstances. My Lord, you must promise that if ever I lose my place, or think myself too good for my station, or take on the airs of a mincing, pretty-boy, you will strip the clothes off my back and whip me as a proper master should!"

A bell tolled from outside in the courtyard. "That's the signal dinner is ready," Torben said. "Hurry."

Help me with this jacket.”

The boy turned away, disappointed. “I was hoping, now that we were alone....”

“That we would use the opportunity for love? There are times, Rudy, when such delights must be postponed.”

“But...look! I can't go down to the banquet hall like this!” And as the lad turned around Torben could see only too clearly that the short page doublet he had bought Rudi that morning did nothing to hide, but rather emphasized, the violent pressures in his young loins. Now the boy's eyes were pleading with him – for relief and to save him from certain social embarrassment.

Torben laughed. “Take those trousers down, Rudi, and then kneel upon the bed. I suppose it's up to the master to subdue the wild stallion in his stable!”

It was a quick operation, a kind of emergency care. Less than a minute later Rudi, jubilant with ecstasy, emptied his ardor between Torben's knowing lips and slumped back upon the bed. But Torben would permit no further lingering. “Now pull up and tuck in,” he demanded.

“That was really wonderful,” Rudi said, coming out of his trance and looking up at Torben with adoring eyes. “I needed it so much!”

“I know. But you must help me dress.”

Torben had selected a simple, elegant, black and gold court suit which quietly emphasized his manly good looks. Master and page now made their final adjustments and quit the apartment. As they walked toward the banquet hall Torben gave Rudi some last minute advice. “You will be serving me, of course, and you will find that things at court are done a little differently than they were at the Steindorph inn. When you are in doubt, just watch the duke's personal page, Heinz. We shall be placed close by, and, as the duke is served first of all, you should have ample opportunity to observe how Heinz behaves. If not, just use your common sense.”

“I shall manage,” Rudi said with conviction.

When they entered the banquet hall about thirty people had already arrived and the table was set for some dozen more. The hall itself was hung with tapestries, set about with enormous Italian chests and lit by two pairs of crystal chandeliers which caught and refracted the light of a hundred candles. Rudi at once walked over to the side wall where he noticed the other pages were waiting: boys from thirteen or thereabouts up to twenty years of age. He was aware of inquisitive stares and a certain amount of excited whispering. A slim, elegantly dressed youth of sixteen approached him with a friendly smile.

“So you are Rudi,” the youth said. “My name is Heinz. My Lord the Duke asked me to help you a bit, until you grow accustomed to our ways here at the castle.”

Rudi thanked him with a smile and looked more closely at this future colleague of his, present successor, in fact, to his own master. There was certainly nothing wrong with the duke's taste, Rudi decided. Heinz was a Nordic blond, with fine, straight hair even lighter than his own. Yet there was much character and resolution in his face, and Rudi immediately sensed that those ample good looks covered a personality with leadership instincts, that he was, in fact, regarded by the other boys and youths as their mentor. It would certainly be wise to stay on good terms with Heinz.

And Heinz himself was going out of his way to be friendly: “They are all immensely surprised that Torben Lerche has suddenly acquired a page,” the youth whispered in his ear. “The duke has told me how you met each other.

Dinnertime at Magdeburg



You must be no ordinary lad, or Torben wouldn't have taken you under his wing, I'm sure." Then Heinz looked closely at Rudi and asked, innocently, "Does he pay you well?"

"I'm...well, I'm not sure yet. The question hasn't come up."

Heinz lifted an eyebrow and nodded in comprehension.

"I think we're in agreement on a lot of things," he whispered. "It's best to stick together against this bunch, because they'd just as soon tease, or even harm, the personal pages of Duke Franz and Torben Lerche as do you a good turn! They're eaten up with envy. They don't like our power. Can I count on you, Rudi?"

Rudi offered Heinz a hand hidden by their short mantles and replied, "Thanks for the warning – even though I had already counted on having to defend myself against the envious. But it's certainly nicer to be two, rather than just one."

Torben, meanwhile, had been greeting old friends at the court. He moved with ease and confidence and characteristic modesty. When questioned about his recent travels he said that he had been occupied by some minor business matters.

At last the great double doors into the duke's quarters were thrown open. A hush fell over the guests as the duke himself stepped down into the banquet hall. Duke Franz nodded politely to everyone but made his way with purpose to where Torben was standing and there, loudly, clearly (and, now, officially) he greeted Torben as a dear and honored guest. He then introduced him to Konrad, Count of Felsen.

Konrad was a young man, now dressed in a lavishly ornamented red suit, who would have been quite handsome were it not for something contemptuous, even mean, about his mouth. His voice, too, was edged with arrogance.

"I understand that Torben Lerche is constantly galloping from one end of Germany to the other on all manner of exciting missions," the count began. "I am honored to make his acquaintance at last. Perhaps some day, too, I will be able to make use of his notable sword – we always employ the very best at the court at Felsen."

This was a man who would have very few friends, Torben decided. "I am afraid, your honor, that my missions are not very exciting, and my sword is only used to defend myself and the people I honor."

They went to the banquet table. Konrad, of course, was seated to the right of Duke Franz, and Torben was placed across the table from him. Torben saw that Konrad was studying him with curiosity and, perhaps, now, the beginnings of anxiety. To Torben's left was an unappealing man in black who, it developed, was Konrad's valet; as Rudi took his place behind his master he instinctively felt that the black valet was one person he must watch.

Very different was the man sitting on the other side of Konrad: a dignitary of the Church of Rome, well on in years and stout, but with a face both friendly and intelligent and which seemed to take on the glow of the white and yellow silk habit he wore. Rudi noticed that Torben knew this man and treated him with genuine respect.

He was, in fact, Julien de Montferrat, Bishop of Reims, famous throughout Europe as one of the best political minds in the Catholic Church. The bishop had been watching the careful, devoted and instinctively elegant way Rudi had been serving Torben, and suddenly the boy felt upon him those wise old eyes conveying awareness of the relationship between page and master, and something else, too, a kind of curiosity he didn't really understand. Rudi acknowledged the bishop's interest with an almost invisible nod of his head. Now the bishop looked away and said, "My dear Torben Lerche, I notice that you have finally acquired a personal page, and, from what I see of him, I should like to congratulate you on your choice. At your convenience, please inform him of my favor."

Torben began to tell the prelate of the happenings at Steindorph, but Rudi was more concerned with the

apparent interest Count Konrad was taking in the tale. He was also annoyed at the wet-lipped way the count was looking at him; it made him distinctly uncomfortable.

Magdeburg was known far and wide for its fine food and gracious entertaining, and now a trumpet sounded and out tumbled a team of acrobats from Genoa. They bounced and sprang and balanced and rolled and performed physical feats that Rudi had never dreamed a body capable of. Then came some English singers performing madrigals by Byrd and Tallis. A neighboring nobleman read a poem about hunting.

When Rudi was out fetching wine for his master, Heinz stopped him and whispered, "Take care with our Count Slyboots: you've obviously taken his fancy. A couple of the castle pages have already fallen out of favor with the duke for being overly sociable with that fellow. Of course, all of them would like to be head page at Felsen or another castle – but this Konrad I think would make a nasty master!"

Rudi nodded. "Even his valet looks malicious. Why's the count here?"

"He's supposed to be discussing a treaty between our duchy and the county of Felsen – you may not know it but Felsen has been fighting and quarreling with its neighbors for years. About a month ago the old count died and his two sons have opened negotiations with us. But I think – and so, as far as I know, does my master – that it's just an excuse to do a little spying on us. And, of course, those pages keep him entertained!"

"Are they nice looking?" Rudi couldn't resist teasing. Heinz laughed. "Very. You will see. Count Konrad tried me once, too. Nothing doing, of course. I'll wager it'll be only a day or two before you have the dubious honor yourself!"

"Thanks, I can live without *that*," Rudi said as they returned to the table.

At last the banquet was over. The castle recorders and trumpets and snare drums sounded the closing fanfare and tattoo. The duke rose, thanked his guests for the courtesy of their attendance and departed, whereupon everyone left the hall to the kitchen staff to clean up.

Back in their quarters, Torben had barely time to compliment Rudi on his excellent performance at the table when there was a knock at the door and Rudi opened it to Heinz.

"The Duke of Magdeburg-Saale requests the presence of Torben Lerche and his page," Heinz said in his most official voice after the door was closed behind him, then added with a big smile, "Sort of incognito, isn't it, Torben?"

"Yes. Just tell him we're on our way. Check the passages, though, as usual."

"Another thing you must know," Torben said after Heinz had left, "is that, except for the Bishop of Reims, nobody at the castle knows of the special relationship between the duke and me."

"I understand," Rudi said.

"With all the sensitive missions I undertake for him, we have decided it's best to maintain the appearance of a certain polite distance."

"Which doesn't exist at all."

"Which most certainly *does* exist, except when we are alone or with trusted friends." Torben looked out the door, now, and waved at Rudi. "The corridors are clear – let's get moving."

The duke went right to the heart of his problem – an approach so characteristic of his old lover that Torben would have been amazed had he lead into his story with the conventional long-winded preamble. As presumed and expected, Count Konrad had come to Magdeburg to spy. The two castle pages Heinz had spoken to Rudi about had been caught in a trap the duke had set; they had been sharply examined and, ultimately, had burst into tears (they were only thirteen) and made complete confessions.

"It seems they'd blabbered everything they knew about the defenses and manning of the castle – which was not a great deal but enough to be dangerous. I was certain, however, that Konrad didn't know we had

found him out, so I instructed the two boys, if they wanted to keep their pretty heads attached to their shoulders, to continue their dalliance with him. As for punishment, I told them I would determine that after Konrad departed.”

“Has Konrad communicated any of his discoveries to Felsen?” Torben asked.

“He tried to, but we intercepted his letter and substituted a meaningless official dispatch.”

“And nobody else about him knows? He has a most unpleasant valet who sat beside me at dinner this evening. Would he share in the knowledge?”

“Most unlikely. Konrad, with reason, doesn't trust very many people.”

“You know that Marcel Lepreaux is at Felsen?”

The duke nodded. “One can only speculate on what that hired trash is up to there.”

“He has a fine reputation as a swordsman.”

“You would make short work of him, I am sure.”

“I am never sure of a man until I have engaged him. Lepreaux, although I know him to be one of the nastiest hoodlums of France, I have never even met.”

“You probably will one day.”

Torben sighed. “Yes, it seems you always do. Well, you asked me to observe Konrad and report to you how I find him. He is not very intelligent. He is cruel. He is vain. I fear for Felsen if his brother is cast from the same mold.”

“I am afraid, having drained my two pages of all they knew, he is now searching about in other directions. He is a nuisance. I haven't intervened directly in his affairs for fear of stirring up trouble, possibly even a full-scale war with the county of Felsen, which I don't have the extra men for just now. Certain arrangements with our friend, the Bishop of Reims, mean that I have to keep peace with Felsen for at least two months. And so, here's my question to you, Torben: would it be possible for you to silence Count Konrad – permanently – if we arrange a duel?”

Torben thought a moment, and then a smile spread slowly over his face. “I would love the chance. He is much too dangerous a person to have running around loose in Magdeburg.”

“That part is decided, then. Now we only need the right kind of excuse for a challenge, and that is where Rudi can assist us, if he accepts the risk and you, Torben give your consent.”

“What do you have in mind?” Torben asked. “My commitment you know you would have even without putting the question to me. With Rudi, however, I would like to have a little more information..”

“My plan is quite simple,” Duke Franz said. “Rudi would seduce the count, or rather lead him on until we catch him. The pages informed me that rape is his preferred way of quelling his lust. We would need an impeccable witness, and I had, of course, thought of the venerable bishop. It would then be quite impossible for Konrad to refuse your challenge. Do you agree?”

Torben looked to Rudi: “It's your decision. If you think you can do what the duke asks I'll give my permission, but if you feel you shouldn't, or that it would not be honorable, then no one is going to blame you.”

But Rudi had already made up his mind. “I don't know how good an actor I am, but I do know that I see nothing dishonorable in trying to play the strange part you have given me. I will do my very best to serve Count Konrad to you gentlemen on a silver platter.”

On their way out of the duke's quarters, Heinz drew Rudi aside and said, “You take on Slyboots even sooner than I predicted! Don't worry, though: I'll be watching over you every minute you're alone.”

“Thanks. I'll need your help.”

“We're two – I told you.”

“I'll remember that.”

Rudi's Achievement

It was the time of the year when nightingales were singing, skylarks hurled down their cascade of song from on high and somewhere off in the misty woods a solitary cuckoo practiced his two good notes. The warmth of summer had settled in at Magdeburg.

Rudi was intensely aware of the loveliness of the weather. Before him a little glade swept down from the quarters occupied by the Duke of Felsen to a pond where the pages were wont to congregate in their own time and, on days like this, strip off their doublets and swim. But Rudi was waiting for a signal. Heinz was standing not far from him in the bushes observing the windows of the apartment behind. At last, three stories above, a curtain shifted, opened a bit on a pair of dark eyes. Heinz's hand dropped and Rudi started to walk slowly and provocatively down the glade.

When he reached the pond he stripped naked and paused and peered into the dark waters. With a little luck, he thought, Konrad would be making his way on the sly toward him.

Rudi dived in, his body welcoming the sudden coolness.

He swam two times across the pond and back, then crawled out and leapt about for a minute on the grass to dry off – and out of sheer physical exuberance. The day was right, he felt wonderful, he was in love, and there was the excitement of the adventure they were all involved in. 'Perhaps, too,' Rudi thought, 'I enjoy being a bit of a tease!'

Now he stretched. He let his hands glide sensually down his chest until they found his boyhood root and the tangled underbrush from which it sprang. With a rapt look of pleasure he began to fondle himself, feeling it swell in his grip. Gentle waves of pleasure flowed outward from his touch, as ripples widen in a pond from a fallen stone.

There was a sound behind him, a rustling in the bushes which indicated that he was not alone. It was impossible to tell whether Konrad was there or both Konrad and Heinz. Rudi fervently hoped that his ally hadn't abandoned him, but he was still at the age of trust, and, besides, the sensuous feelings he was inducing in himself dulled his worry. He remained standing as long as it seemed practical, then lay down in the grass and, with one arm under his neck, staring at the blue sky, nose twitching to all the sensual scents of flowers and grass and the rich, fertile earth of spring, he gave himself completely over to the most universal entertainment of adolescent boys.

Surprisingly, his mind was not at the moment filled with Torben, nor was it filled with Heinz, whom he found attractive, nor Bruno, the young Provencal page Duke Franz had assigned to their suite. He was thinking only of his own body, of how wonderful the swim had felt and, now, of the kiss of the sun and the breath of the wind as they, too, made love to his skin. It was a fleeting experience of self-love, understandable in one so young and one which, ten years later, he would never be able to repeat.

Then, just as all that was in him was about to rise, a shadow crossed the sun: Count Konrad loomed

above, staring down with cruel pleasure.

“So this is the kind of debauchery the Magdeburg pages engage in during their leisure hours!” Konrad said.

Rudi jumped to his feet and blushed convincingly. “Oh, Sir, I am most ashamed,” he stammered. “The weather was so fine...I had time on my hands...”

“More than that on your hands! Stop excusing yourself. Come here. *Here!*” And the count pointed to the grass in front of his feet.

Hanging his head, Rudi stepped toward the tall man. ‘Heinz,’ he prayed, ‘I hope you’re near me now!’

Without further words Count Konrad grabbed the naked boy, bent him over with an arm about his waist and a hand around the handle which had been the focus of Rudi’s rapt attention seconds before, and began to deliver to the now tightly stretched buttocks a series of stinging flicks with his riding crop.

Rudi produced a proper wail of anguish, although, in truth, the pain was not unbearable. And it certainly was unable to stem his youthful sap which now, with all the excitement and under the stimulation of Count Konrad’s grip, was not to be denied a second time its rise. With a violent shudder Rudi seeded the hand which held him and, when his loins were drained, went limp.

Konrad threw the boy down on the grass and started cleaning his hand with a perfumed silk handkerchief. “Gutter-snipe, capon, mongrel, toad!” he swore. “I am going immediately to your master and tell him what a shiftless rascal he has in his employ.”

Rudi managed to squeeze some lingering pond water out of his eyes and, hoping the drops would pass for tears, wailed, “Oh, Herr Lerche is sure to thrash me until I die! Please, *please* don’t tell my master. I’ll do anything you say!”

“Anything?” A look of satisfaction stole over the count’s dark features. “Very well, I’ll tell neither your master nor the duke, but don’t expect to get off free. On their behalf, I, Konrad of Felsen, will personally take your education in hand.”

“Oh, Sir, I would be most grateful. I am sure you will find me a good student.”

“We shall see. Now listen carefully. If you go to the eastern tower and climb the spiral staircase you will find a room at the top. There, at eight o’clock tonight, I shall demonstrate to you, with my own hands, how I train lecherous boys. Be there then – unless you want Torben Lerche informed of your lazy vice. If you submit to my punishment, behave to my satisfaction – and, furthermore, help me with a few small bits of information I need – then you shall have nothing more to worry about from me.”

“Oh, Sir, I will surely do as you command, but...” Rudi let his voice trail off with pretended timidity.

“But what?”

“I beg you to remember that I am only a young boy and I have not been long in service...”

“Just be there at eight,” Count Konrad said. And with a final glance at the naked figure, he turned on his heel and walked away.

Konrad had hardly left, and Rudi had barely time to pull on his trousers, when Heinz appeared, laughing behind his hand. “Magnificent performance!” the older boy whispered. “I couldn’t have enjoyed the act more.”

“Fine, it wasn’t you that was being whipped!”

“Nor was it I that was spouting when things got complicated, although there was certainly a temptation in that direction. Did he really hurt you?”

Rudi shook his head. “I’ve been punished many times much worse than that.”

They walked back to the castle, deep in gossip, and made their way to Torben’s suite. But Bruno, the young page, told them that Torben had gone on some business into the town, so Heinz led Rudi to his master’s study where they found Duke Franz in conference with the Bishop of Reims.

The bishop had already been informed of the conspiracy and now accepted his role in it gladly, "partly because arrangements like this appeal to the politician in me, and partly because I'm interested in bringing to an end the hold the Felsen family has in this region. And then, too, Konrad is such a nasty piece of goods." The bishop smiled benevolently and put the tips of his fingers together over the golden cross embroidered on his costume where it covered his stomach.

When Torben returned there was barely enough time for Rudi to tell him, breathlessly, of the day's events, and to dress him and make his way to the dining hall. The four conspirators succeeded in behaving quite naturally during the evening meal, although once, when Torben caught Count Konrad contemptuously eyeing Rudi, he nearly lost his equilibrium; then he had to imagine with what delight he would soon be running that strutting peacock through with his sword.

A short time later, when Rudi was serving the dessert course, Torben felt the boy's hand on his arm giving it a cautious and gentle stroke. It was just a brief touch and, since all the other pages were also standing close behind their masters' chairs, nobody could have noticed it. Suddenly it was clear to Torben that his little friend needed a bit of reassurance. There had been so little time to talk things over while they were getting dressed. How frightened was the boy, really? Was he worried that his master might be angry at the means he had used to trap the count into their assignation?

Torben leaned back a little in his chair, letting one hand fall behind his back. It was immediately met by a sinewy boy's fist. A single firm and affectionate squeeze told him that this was just what the lad had been looking for: the quivering muscles of the slim hand relaxed, and with complete trust he caressed Torben's strong fingers.

At last the guests left the dining table. Konrad looked full at Rudi and lifted an arrogant eyebrow. Rudi nodded his head in a diffident and humble manner and watched the count turn on his heel and leave.

Torben noticed the exchange of signals and thought, 'So, my friend, you think you have the perfect combination of victim for your lusts and a well of information about me and the role I play in affairs here. Soon, you imagine, you will be able to put to a bloody end Franz's power and install the counts of Felsen as rulers of the rich Magdeburg. Enjoy your hour of anticipation, for it will be short-lived.'

It was nearly eight. Rudi barely had time to return Torben's service to the kitchen before he had to hasten to the east tower.

Heinz stopped him before he mounted the staircase.

"Count Konrad is already up there. Torben and the bishop are in the room off the first balcony and will be at the door as soon as you close it behind you. Don't worry when the count turns the key: I took apart the lock this afternoon, so it makes all the right noises but will keep nobody out. Now be on your way. And good luck, Rudi!" There was a merry gleam in Heinz's blue eyes.

Rudi mounted the stairs and knocked cautiously on the heavy oak door. It was opened at once by Count Konrad.

"So, you are here," the count said. "For a little gutter snipe you are at least wise enough to know when to act in your own best interests, isn't that right?"

"Yes, Sir," Rudi said. "I mean, I suppose so."

"And you're ready to learn your lesson?"

"I am here at your command and your pleasure, my Lord. But what are you going to do?"

Rudi looked nervously around the gloomy room. There was little in the way of furniture: only a worn table, a couple of stiff chairs, a huge chest which had seen better days and was covered with a long cushion, serving, obviously, as a kind of couch.

"You'll find out soon enough," said the count. "Get that clothing off!"

"My clothing, my lord?" Rudi stammered.

“You heard me!”

Slowly, playing for time, Rudi loosened his buttons. When the boy's chest came bare and Rudi started carefully folding his shirt to lay it aside, Count Konrad could restrain his impatience no longer. He grabbed Rudi by his breeches and ripped them down, all the time hissing angrily, “Stop fighting me, you little mischief! Misbehave one more time and you'll feel the full fury of Felsen for many days, no, many *weeks*, hereafter!”

By now the pants which Torben had given him at *Zum Goldnen Stern* lay in tatters about his ankles. Konrad grabbed him by his hair, bent him over the chest and forced him to his knees. He was holding him in so strong a hug that Rudi could make no effective resistance. And then the boy felt the warm, wet weapon of the count moving into position, searching with its softer tip the right point of entry. With disgust he heard Konrad panting into his ear.

“Now, you little rascal” Konrad growled, “know what it feels like to be taken by a real man!”

Konrad lunged. Pain shot through Rudi's body and forced a muffled scream from between clenched teeth. With Torben, Rudi was always open and his master gentle. Now the boy tried to hold himself shut with all the strength his young muscles could summon. But Konrad was enormously bigger and his weapon in the long run invincible. Rudi screamed a second time and felt it run fully into him, and then his surroundings disappeared in a mist of agony.

When he came to his senses again, Torben and the Bishop of Reims were in the room and Count Konrad was standing before them, beet-red with anger and embarrassment, trying to hold up his trousers.

“So,” said Torben, with contempt as sharp as a sword, “this is how the noble Count of Felsen shows his appreciation for the hospitality of my master!”

“Get out! Get out of here!” Count Konrad croaked.

“We shall, soon enough and at our own pleasure,” Torben returned. “I have traveled widely in Europe, as you know, and my experience is not restricted to polite company and drawing-room society, but I have never in my whole life seen such filthy, cowardly cruelty, even in the lowest carrier of hogswill!”

“This is no business of yours! I am the Count of Felsen and this little rascal is just a page!”

“My page!”

“Ah, yes,” the Bishop of Reims interjected piously, “it is the concern of the Church, and not just my church but those other churches which flourish in the German counties, too, that our youngsters be protected from all manner of attacks which might endanger the health of their souls....”

“I don't accept insults from hired helpers, Torben Lerche!” Konrad suddenly raged, totally ignoring the bishop. He took a wild swing with his fist at Torben, and missed.

“I presume you intend to fight a duel, Count Felsen,” Torben said. “Wouldn't it have been better simply to challenge me rather than rage like a spoiled brat?”

Count Konrad gathered what remains of dignity were left him and said, “It will give me exquisite pleasure to run you through with my sword tomorrow morning. I shall have my valet make arrangements with yours – or, rather, with this page, as you call him.” And then, stiff and pale, he left the tower room.

Now Torben hurried to Rudi, who was still slumped in a daze beside the chest, and gathered him into his arms. “Dear Rudi,” he said, “it's over. You were magnificent. You'll never know how proud of you I am. Dry your tears...” and Torben started kissing them away. Rudi hung his arms around Torben's neck and allowed himself to be picked up and helped back into the remnants of his clothes.

It was five jubilant conspirators who assembled in the duke's quarters a few minutes later. Heinz brought out a bottle of very special Bordeaux from the duke's private stock; they toasted Rudi and his

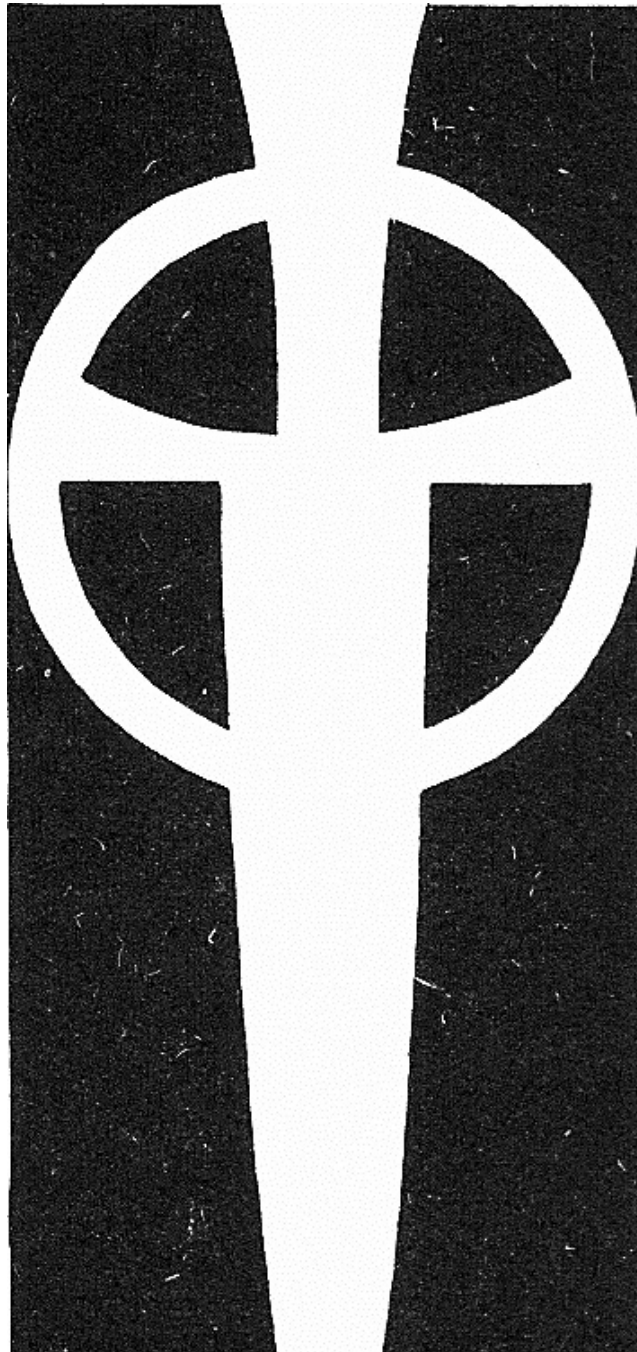
courage and drank to success on the morrow. "We should have little doubt over the outcome," Duke Franz said. "No one can best Torben's swordsmanship; there's no defense against his fabulous masked thrust to the forehead. But let us still be cautious. The count is more than a good swordsman and has great confidence in himself, so take care, Torben, that a lucky lunge doesn't catch you by surprise."

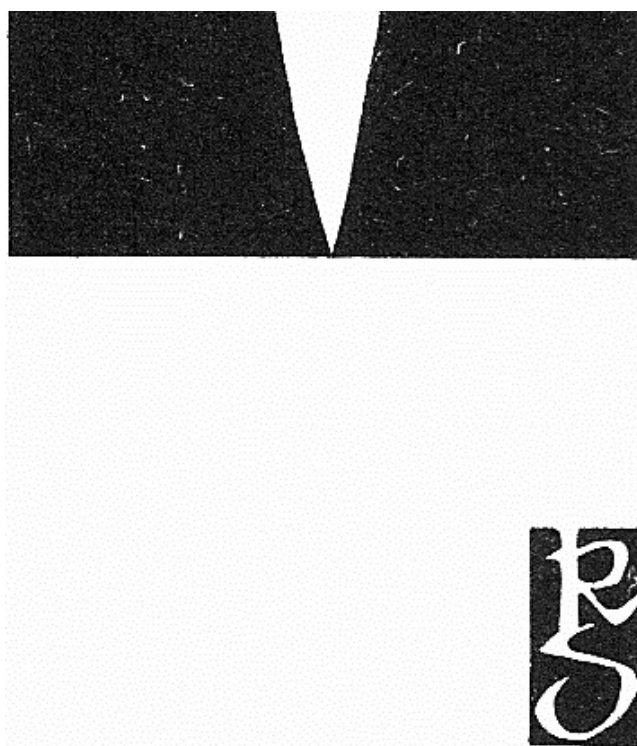
"I shall fight in cold, calculated anger, the mood in which I'm at my best," said Torben. "I shall fight for your interests, to satisfy my hatred, and to avenge the insult to Rudi's honor."

"Another toast," said the worthy Bishop of Reims. "To Konrad's departure through the gates of the Magdeburg – feet first!"

That night, as quiet settled over the castle, Torben drew Rudi into his bed and put all his feeling and all his experience into calming the young boy's agitation. They kissed long and tenderly, held each other close, fondly whispered, as Torben moved to the needs of the boy in his embrace. Thrice Rudi emptied himself under the tender solace of his master's caresses and finally fell deeply asleep in Torben's arms.

In the window, now, stood a pallid moon. For a few minutes Torben lay awake watching its ghostly light pour like a gentle waterfall down upon their two naked bodies and play on the tousled head of his beloved. Then he, too, shut his eyes and, at peace with himself, slept.





The Duel

Early morning mist hung motionless in the castle meadow where the duelists were going to face each other. It seemed too sweet a day for death: a million flowers were scenting the air; bees worked at them, stepping around the drops of dew which still rested in the lower petals; dew sparkled in the grass, too, and dripped from the trees whenever a zephyr of spring stirred the tender leaves.

News of the duel had spread quickly through the castle. No one, of course, knew the real reason for it, but there was a feeling of inevitability, as though everyone realized, somewhere in the back of his mind, that these two noted swordsmen, so different in temperament and serving such opposed interests, should clash in blood and steel. Now the duke and his retainers, the Bishop of Reims and the party of the Count of Felsen, walked out onto the grass. They made a colorful and splendid sight: Duke Franz in his court dress of severe black and red, his pages in blue, yellow and white, the bishop in the white and gold habit of his church and the group from Felsen in doublets of green and ocher.

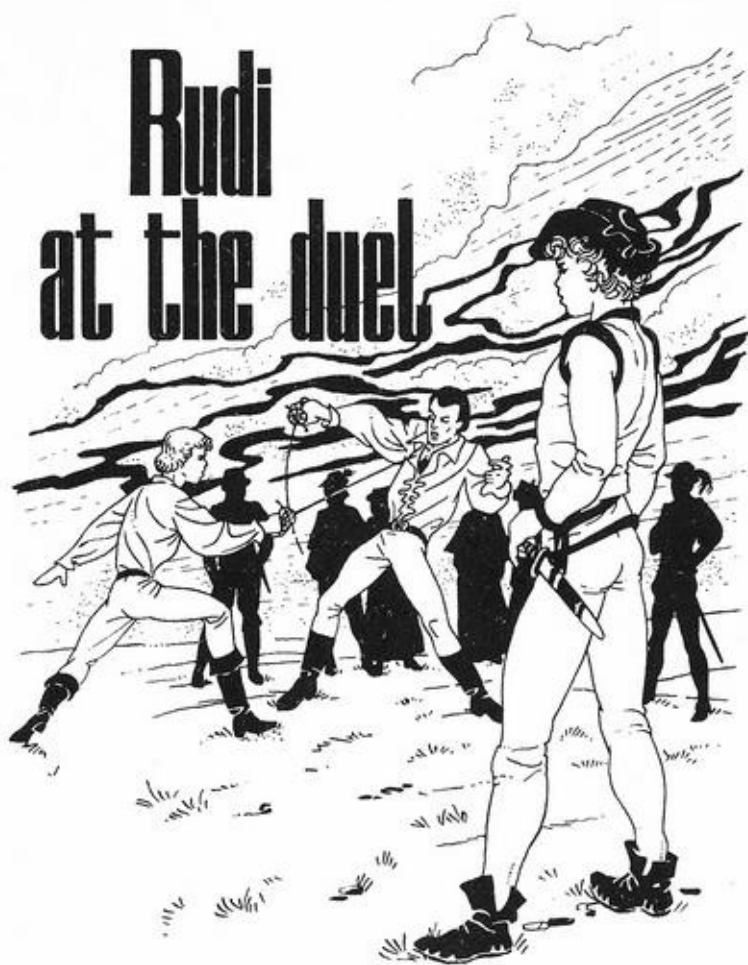
Count Konrad was the first of the combatants to appear, accompanied by Sigismund Vogel, the black valet, carrying his fighting rapier under one arm. Vogel said nothing and it was impossible to tell from his face what might be in his thoughts. Konrad, on the other hand, bowed to the duke and said, with a tight smile, "This is going to be a very short performance."

"We reserve judgment until the matter is settled and the field is cleared," Duke Franz replied.

Now Torben and Rudi arrived, Rudi grave and obviously a bit frightened, but his master looking for all the world as though he had just come out for a morning stroll through the lovely glades and forests of Magdeburg. Torben spoke briefly with the duke, smiled and chatted with his friends, but those who knew him well would have noticed an alertness in his gray eyes that only came there, they knew, when danger was about, and they felt momentary pity for Count Konrad strutting in front of his supporters.

The castle herald stepped forward and, as the crowd went silent, read the standard text about duels. This one, he announced, closing the book, would not cease at the first drawn blood: it would be a fight to the death. He gave a signal. Torben turned to Rudi, who gravely handed him his sword. Their fingers touched, each trying to reassure the other. Then Torben turned around, gave a curt bow to his adversary and the duel began.

Rudi at the duel



pg

Now the meadow rang to the sound of steel on steel. For the first few minutes Torben and Konrad tested each other. They lunged, parried, each looking for the strengths and weaknesses in the other's technique. When Konrad thought he had taken the measure of his adversary he gave a sudden smile to the duke as though to say 'Now we begin in earnest'.

Count Konrad commenced brilliantly with a large and varied repertory of elegant attacks which drew, from time to time, polite applause from his admirers. He looked very good, and Rudi, who knew nothing about fencing, felt his face grow paler and paler and his heart begin to pound until it seemed to be trying to climb right into his throat. But then, after a particularly dazzling attack of the count, Rudi noticed a slight smile playing on the face of his master and he began to realize what all the experts in the crowd had already seen: Torben was simply parrying each of the duke's maneuvers with playful easiness and a minimum of effort.

Count Konrad was learning that the easy superiority he assumed he had was being met with a defense which was at least competent and perhaps even subtle. With a real stab of concern he realized that as yet he had no feel of Torben's attack. Obviously he would not be able to end the duel quite as quickly as he had boasted, for the reputation of this Torben Lerche seemed to be well deserved.

Except for the sound of clashing steel, and an occasional grunt or oath from the Count of Felsen, complete silence had descended upon the meadow. Once again Konrad went through his repertory of maneuvers and this time, if anything, Torben parried them even more effortlessly. And then, with a flick of the wrist so quick that most of the spectators couldn't see how it was done, Torben lunged, caught Count Konrad off balance and hurled his rapier several yards away in the grass.

"My God!" Rudi exclaimed, and found he was gripping the arm of Bruno, who was standing beside him applauding with the rest of the duke's party. Bruno looked up at him with what Rudi suddenly realized was adoration. It wasn't Torben who was the hero of the young Provencal lad; it was he, Rudi, a common, if rather well-loved, page!

On the field of battle Torben waited with an ironic smile for the count's valet to pick up the fallen weapon and hand it to his master. The fight began again. This time Konrad was obviously shaken, and he was sweating heavily. Now Torben was beginning to press him – nothing to worry about at first – until another fast maneuver with that incredible wrist of steel once again sent the count's sword flying through the air to impale the meadow with its point and stand there like a tilted and gently waving cross.

When the rapier was fetched for him, Count Konrad demanded a short rest in order to examine it, with his valet, for damage. They spoke a few words to each other, and Rudi had the feeling they were not discussing the rapier. He would have to keep a close eye on both of them, now.

Once again the interrupted duel was resumed, but Rudi saw that this time Vogel, instead of stepping backwards, remained where he was, and Count Konrad was luring his adversary toward him. The valet slowly transferred his weight to one leg, and now Rudi understood what his game was: he would trip Torben so that either Count Konrad could run him through on the ground or claim Torben had quit the field of battle in cowardice.

Close and closer Torben came to the danger, and then, just as the valet was about to make his move, something was seen flashing through the air and Vogel fell to the ground with a scream of pain and Rudi's dagger buried deep in his thigh.

Immediately the assembled spectators understood what had been intended and how it had been prevented. Torben retreated to the center of the field from where he delivered a graceful swordsman's greeting to his resourceful page. Count Konrad now had to defend himself on another side:

"My Lord," he said to Duke Franz, "I had no idea that Sigismund, my valet, carried away as he evidently was with his loyalty to me, would attempt this unnecessary intervention. I apologize with all my

heart for his mistake in his judgment. I shall deal with him most severely, you may be assured, when we return to Felsen.”

Meantime, the wounded man was removed from the meadow, and before Rudi even realized Bruno had left his side the young boy was back bearing Rudi's dagger. “Wow!” Bruno said, “that was something to see! Now the count better take care. Just look at the anger in your master's eyes!”

The final phase of the duel began. Torben was at last entirely on the attack. A sigh, a gasp from the spectators showed their deep appreciation of the incredible swordsmanship which had suddenly been unleashed before them. With a storm of lunges so complicated and difficult that few could follow, Konrad was put into full retreat. Only with the greatest effort was he able to keep Torben at arm's length. For Felsen, the duel had turned from anticipation of easy victory to a matter of sheer survival.

Suddenly Torben ceased his attack. Count Konrad, gathering the last of his waning resources, made a sudden lunge, reckless and desperate. This was exactly what Torben had been waiting for. An almost imperceptible flick of his wrist parried the count's sword. For a fraction of a second Torben's rapier, held high, caught the sunlight and, as Konrad's blade passed within inches of his heart, touched, and then with great force, drove into Konrad's skull precisely between his eyes. The count froze. Then his rapier fell out of a lifeless hand and his body crashed to the ground as though felled by a woodsman's ax.

Back in the duke's apartment, Duke Franz, the Bishop of Reims, Torben and the two young pages who had played such essential parts in the successful conspiracy, drank to their comradeship and relived the glory of the day.

“That was the second time Rudi has saved my life,” Torben said “And with a master's throw! Wherever did you learn to hurl a knife like that?”

“It was one of my few pleasures at the Steindorph inn,” Rudi immediately replied. “I taught myself. I'm glad I have at least one skill in the use of arms. I don't know how to fence, although I would dearly love to learn.”

“Then I shall teach you,” Torben said.

“And so shall I,” said Duke Franz, who was known as a superb coach and an excellent tactician.

“And you can practice with me,” said Heinz.

Torben smiled. “But beware: Franz has taught that long lout rather well and Heinz could have given Konrad a hint or two this afternoon.”

At length the jubilation of victory mellowed and, with the effect of the wine, the little party fell into a more reflective mood. The duke stood up and delivered a speech:

“I know perfectly well, my dear Torben, that you will never take gifts for the tasks you so willingly accept and do so well for me, but I believe you, too, will regard it as a personal reward when I present Rudi with our token of gratitude for his deed this morning.”

The duke opened a little box on his desk and brought out something which caught the summer sunlight streaming into the apartment and turned it into the purest and softest of gold.

“Come here, Rudi. Kneel before me. In the short time I've known you I have come to admire and respect you so much that I have no hesitation in making you a member of our little association. Take this golden necklace with its dagger-shaped cross. It will include you among the most valiant and deserving men in all the known world – an association of which I'm proud to be the leader and in which all others present in this room are members.”

On bent knees and with bowed head Rudi received the beautiful chain and emblem about his neck, and when he rose and looked at the duke and Heinz and Torben and the bishop tears stood in his eyes. His heart was so filled with love and pride and hope that the only way he could think of expressing his

gratitude was by telling a very personal and perhaps a rather silly story:

“I once had a ring which, as a child, I thought was very beautiful. I wore it on a string around my neck, because it had been made for a man and my fingers were still too small. I loved that ring, but my love of this is far, far greater. I shall try all my life to be worthy of it, and the great men it links me to.”

Rudi fell into Torben's embrace, and then he shook hands rather formally with the other members of the League of the Dagger. When he came to the bishop the old man looked at him closely and said, “My son, do you remember what that ring of yours looked like?”

“Why, yes,” Rudi replied. “It was silver-colored and there was a stone with a unicorn on it, which was silly since everyone knows there aren't unicorns any more.”

“What happened to the ring?”

“It's at Steindorph, I suppose. I had a hiding place for it in the kitchen where I slept, but Torben and I had to leave in some hurry. Well, please, Sir, don't worry about it. With this medallion I will never think about it again!”

Chapter 6

The Punishment of the Pages

There was now the matter of the young traitors, the pages who had blabbered about Magdeburg's defenses to the late Count of Felsen. The moment the duel was called they had been cast into the dungeon. There, in gloom and dampness, in separate cells, they nervously awaited such punishment as the duke chose to mete out to them.

And it was there Duke Franz, Torben, Rudi and Heinz now made their way, down to a part of the castle Rudi had never seen. They left behind their own elegant quarters, the industrious areas of support where food was cooked, leather cut and sewn, horses shod, linen washed, weapons fashioned, and descended to those depths where, for centuries, and until only recently, the enemies of Magdeburg had been held for ransom, executed or screamed out their last hours alive on one or another instrument of torture.

“We don't use these any more, of course,” said Duke Franz as they passed by the stretching racks, the kiln with its rusted branding irons and collection of thumb-screws, bone-breakers and knuckle-poppers. “But just having them here often has the right effect – especially on the young and impressionable.”

“But one room is still in use,” Heinz said with a twinkle in his eye, “and some of the equipment there.”

“Yes, indeed,” the duke replied. “You should know.” And he gave Heinz a playful lash across the buttocks with the flat of his rapier.

“Ouch!” the lad said. “It isn't me we're supposed to be punishing!”

They had come into another, smaller chamber, also equipped with articles of restraint, and these had a much more used look about them. There were manacles on the walls, chains hanging down from the ceiling, and on the floor at one end of the room several wooden racks of table height with leather straps obviously intended for securing human bodies upon them. Rudi felt a lump come into his throat. What kind of cruelty, he wondered, did Duke Franz practice down here? Was there a dark side of Magdeburg he hadn't suspected before? His confusion must have shown, for Heinz took his arm and drew him aside and winked and said, “You will now see how my master can turn punishment into pleasure and so bind boys to him with a kind of loyalty those things in the other room were never able to wring out of people.”

Cheer up, Rudi, but, to begin with, don't let the boys see this is all something of a sham!"

Now the jailor brought in the two errant pages. Their proud castle doublets had been taken from them and only rags of the rudest peasant cloth covered their bodies. They dropped to their knees before Duke Franz and stammered pleas for forgiveness.

"Are you truly repentant?" the Duke asked. The boys nodded as one.

"You once before pledged your loyalty, and look how believable that pledge turned out to be."

"But we've learned, my Lord!"

"Oh, no, Sir, we'll never do that again!"

The duke stroked his chin, arched an eyebrow at Torben, then fixed the boys with his most intimidating stare. "Very well. My punishment will be fifteen lashes apiece with the small whip, administered by Rudi and Heinz, and that will be all. Now, out of those rags and onto the racks. Heinz, Rudi, lash the lads down, and make quick work of it!"

The small whip; only fifteen lashes! The boys looked enormously relieved. They dropped their clothes and went almost happily to the torture tables.

"Watch how I do it," Heinz said to Rudi, then gave a naughty smile. "I've dealt with these machines both ways, as you may have gathered."

First the boys were made to stand facing the end of the racks so that their ankles could be strapped to the legs of the instrument. Rudi noticed that the top of each of the racks seemed to have a big bite taken out of it, and it was over this bite that the boys were now bent and their wrists fastened before them at the far end. Neither of the boys put up even a token resistance.

Heinz took down two whips from the wall and gave one to Rudi, who now tested it in the air, making little whimpering sounds which echoed between the stone walls. He still felt a bit sorry for the pages, but at the same time he was excited, and aroused.

"Ready?" said Heinz. "Both together. Go!" Simultaneously with Heinz he lifted the whip and let the first lash cut down upon the tight skin, noticing how instantly a red mark rose on the young white buttocks. Again he came down, and again and again. The victims moaned a bit but managed their punishment without the screeching and wailing one might have expected from thirteen-year-olds.

"Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen," Torben counted from the other side of the chamber.

"That was it," Duke Franz said. "So you can loosen the straps and let those red-wealed sinners dress again – we'll tell the turnkey to ready their castle doublets."

With these words Duke Franz and Torben left the room.

Once out of earshot, Duke Franz turned to Torben. "Do you suppose they'll take advantage of the opportunity?" he asked.

"Let's watch. I think they were a bit excited." They tip-toed back to the door.

Inside the chamber Heinz and Rudi were looking at each other, smiles slowly spreading over both of their faces. Was the same thing going through Heinz's mind, Rudi wondered. The sight of the two punished boys, still strapped down and all too vulnerable, had brought him into the highest state of tension – and a glance at Heinz's trousers told him that his companion in punishment had exactly the same problem.

Heinz cleared his throat and said, "What do you think? Shouldn't we give them a little extra treatment – for their own good, of course?"

Rudi shrugged: he didn't really know what to do next. "Look how inviting they are," Heinz continued, "hanging there with their little red-striped bottoms! I'm going to have it on with mine!"

Temptation swept away all of Rudi's hesitations. He grinned at Heinz. "All right," he said. "I'm with you!"

At first the two pages were just surprised. Then they began to grin as they felt a part of the male body they had long become accustomed to accommodating sliding skilfully and happily into them home. For Rudi it was the first time he had ever experienced what Torben felt nightly with him. He caught Heinz's eye and the two boys began to laugh. Then, tentatively at first, they were joined by the boys on the racks. Soon the whole chamber was echoing with young whoops. Together all four toiled and labored; the old racks rocked and creaked and strained at their leather bindings. Hands gripped underneath and, through the 'bite' in the rack tops, found the ready handles of the uncomplaining victims and quickly worked them to the point of no return.

Suddenly everything went silent. Outside the door Torben nodded to Duke Franz and said, "That's the crucial point – let's go."

They stepped into the room just as Rudi and Heinz administered their final lunges.

"Well, well, aren't we enjoying ourselves!" the duke exclaimed. "Can't leave you boys alone for one minute before you get into some new kind of mischief!"

Rudi blushed bright red and backed away from his satisfied and now quite exhausted victim, trying frantically to rearrange his clothes.

I didn't do it!" cried one of the boys on the rack.

"It wasn't *my* fault," said the other. "I was tied up!"

"Release the wretches," Duke Franz said, and when his orders had been carried out he turned to the striped-bottom boys and said, "Not a single breath about the final scene, lads – or you're instantly out of this castle on your ears. Understand?"

The humbled boys nodded quickly and, still naked, scuttled out of the room in search of the turnkey and their castle costumes.

Now Torben and the duke burst into laughter.

"Does that mean you aren't really mad at us?" Heinz asked tentatively.

"Mad, my dear Heinz? Certainly not."

"No healthy young boy could resist such a sight," Torben added for Rudi's benefit.

"Good," Rudi said. He was greatly relieved. "Can we go now? I want to see my rapier and talk with my friend the sword-maker."

He and Heinz started toward the door, but Torben blocked their way.

"Wait a minute, you lusty little page-punishers. Are you surprised that the

lascivious sight we saw, when, totally by accident, of course, we just happened to peer through that archway a minute ago, has put both of us into such a state of emergency that we demand the rights of our passions?"

Rudi looked up at Torben. "Now? Just like that?"

"Yes," said Torben.

"And what would you say to an exchange?" asked the duke.

The two youths looked searchingly at each other, and then Heinz said to Duke Franz, "If the exchange is with Rudi, I wouldn't mind."

"And you?" Torben asked Rudi.

A mischievous smile came onto Rudi's face. "Why not?"

"All right, then, off with those breeches and onto the rack!" Torben said.

"No need for the straps, I presume," said the duke. Soon the boys were prettily positioned where only a short time before the count's young turncoats had been, and then Rudi from the duke and Heinz from Torben Lerche received exactly the same infusion they had themselves earlier administered. Once again the old racks creaked and rocked. Rudi caught Heinz's eye and each with a smile conveyed to the other the sense of naughty fun he was feeling.

It was over all too quickly, with a near-simultaneous explosion of four passions.

"Well, how was that, lads?" the duke inquired, when they had all recovered a little.

"It was nice," Rudi said, "but I think I'll still stick with Torben."

"That's as it should be," said the duke. "I hope Heinz feels the same way about me."

"I contemplate no changes." Then Heinz added mischievously, "Although Torben *is* the younger by quite a few years."

"What impudence!" the duke exclaimed, and he grabbed Heinz and delivered a quick slap to his bottom before the boy had completely drawn up his pants. Then he kissed Heinz on the lips and the youth moved into his fond embrace and lingered there as though all the world about them had dissolved like a sand-castle in the rising tide. "I see I'll have to keep a better eye on you in the future," Duke Franz whispered.

"And I shall have to work harder to see that *your* eye doesn't stray too far from me!"

Rudi's wish to visit the sword-maker's shop was quite genuine, for there a rapier, sized and weighted to his body and the grip fashioned to his hand, had slowly, under Torben's direction, been taking form. The day after the punishment of the pages it was finally ready, and, bursting with excitement, Rudi presented himself with it to Torben in what he presumed was a fencer's stance. "Now I'm not just your page," he said, "I'm your pupil. Someday I'll be a real help, fighting at your side."

Torben looked at Rudi and touched his face with sudden gentleness. 'Yes, little Rudi,' he thought, 'that day will come all too soon. I would that time could be stopped, that boys weren't so impatient to take up the swords of men!' But then his sudden sadness was swept away at the exciting prospect of working with Rudi in the pleasant glades of Magdeburg.

His first lesson began that very afternoon: footwork, balance, the preliminaries of parrying. Rudi was wearing a white shirt open down the chest, tight blue breeches and black boots laced half way up his calves. He was a lovely sight, even when his movements were still unpracticed and tentative.

"No! Like this. Now, pay attention. One – right foot forward. Left hand, fingers touching your shoulder – your *shoulder*, not your nipple! All right. Two, *lunge*. No, Rudi, you're dead. See what you did?"

“But Torben, when am I going to be able to use my sword?”

Duke Franz and Heinz wandered by. Rudi was embarrassed to have them see him while he still felt so awkward, but Torben, who had been critical to the point of wounding his feelings, now said, “Watch out, Heinz. I’ll give Rudi fourteen days, and then he’ll be giving even you a bit of competition.”

Rudi swelled with pride and felt tears of relief and love coming to his eyes. When they were alone again together he said to Torben, “Did you mean that? What you said to Heinz?”

But Torben wasn't going to allow his pupil to bask in self-congratulatory glory. “On guard!” he said. “No, snail, you're dead again!”

The following day they paused in their lesson to watch a gloomy little procession assemble inside the castle gate and finally ride out. It was the black valet, now recovered enough from the wound made by Rudi's dagger to quit his room at Magdeburg and escort the body of his late master back to Felsen. No farewells were taken, no handshakes given.

“Count Reinhard won't be pleased when this party comes crawling into his castle,” Torben said.

They had been joined by Duke Franz and Heinz. “Well, he cannot use this as an excuse to attack Magdeburg,” the duke said.

“It's the two of us he'll be after – Rudi and me! Did you catch that look of hatred on Sigismund Vogel's face as he passed? Oh, well, we'll take each difficulty as it comes along.”

The fencing was going better. Rudi began dreaming of it; at night Torben felt his body twitch as his arms and legs responded to some imagined adversary. Daytime the boy would talk of nothing but his lessons. When Rudi had progressed a little farther, Bruno was appointed his sword bearer, so that now there was always at least one spectator on the field – and one who watched everything Rudi did with uncritical admiration. Rudi would lose his balance and Bruno would smile. Rudi would lunge, leaving himself dangerously vulnerable, and Bruno would applaud. Then Torben would scowl at Bruno and the young boy's hands would drop to his side, but all the time his eyes kept seeking Rudi's. Whenever Rudi needed a little support after Torben's criticism he could find it in the glance of the young Provencal lad who slept by the door to their suite at night and guarded their safety as though it was his own.

“You know he loves you,” Torben said one day, after they had sent Bruno trotting off for a jug of cool well water.

“I don't encourage him,” Rudi replied.

“Do you find him attractive?”

Rudi searched Torben's eyes for signs of jealousy and, finding none, said, “Yes, in a little-boy sort of way. Besides, I speak French to him, my childhood tongue, and he appreciates that.”

“Well, Rudi, a loved page is a loyal page.”

“I should know.”

“But Bruno doesn't.”

“I love *you*.”

“It's all right to lie with another once in a while. Sometimes there's so much love in us that it has to overflow. Choose your time with Bruno. I shan't be angry.”

As Rudi gained in skill and confidence he began to look forward to the occasional visits of Duke Franz and Heinz and enjoyed showing off a new technique or tactic Torben had just taught him. Now he had his first lesson from Duke Franz, and a practice bout with Heinz. They both were impressed, and praised alike the skill of the teacher and the student's quick reflexes and talent.

“I am convinced you are turning out a first-rate swordsman,” the duke told Torben one evening at

supper. Except for the Bishop of Reims, there were no longer guests in the castle; the two couples were eating in the duke's quarters, in the same Italian room where Rudi had first met the master of Magdeburg.

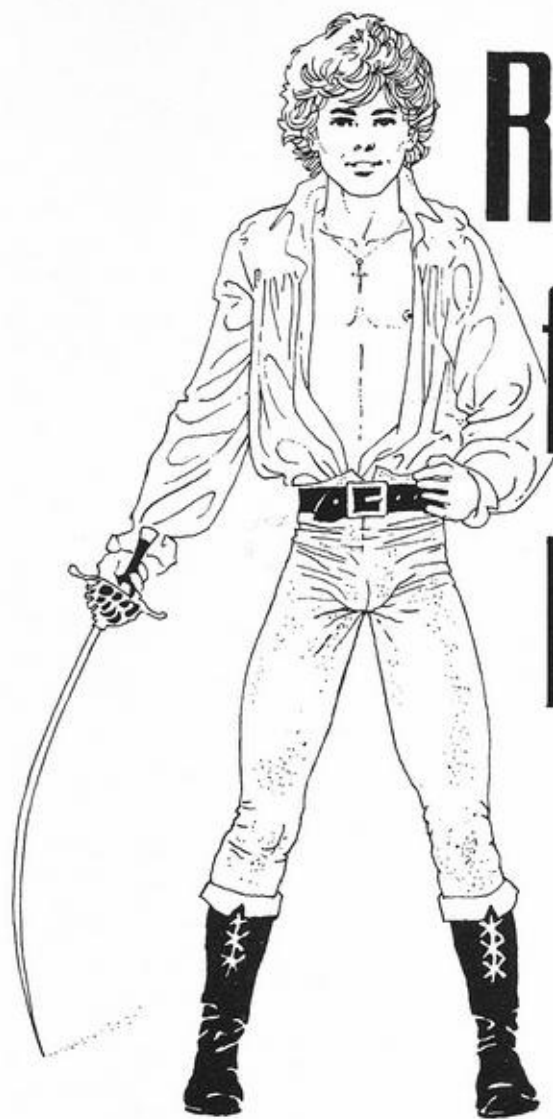
“He would have been dead three times today if he had been up against an even competent antagonist,” Torben said.

“A week ago he would have been dead fifty times,” Duke Franz replied. “Why are you so miserly with your praise?”

“Because,” Torben said, turning to Rudi and looking fondly into his open blue eyes, “though I love him, I know that you only learn something difficult under pressure. And there's not much point in being second best in a duel to the death.”

“Well, I'm no judge of that kind of combat,” said the Bishop of Reims smiling across the candle-lit table at Rudi, “but I can say that he looks absolutely magnificent.” And, indeed, he did. The open sun had streaked Rudi's hair into a rich texture of bright yellow and deep gold. His skin, despite his blond coloration, had taken a light tan. Youth, health, exuberance, love, and now a warm flush of pleasure at the bishop's words, radiated from his face and warmed all the older men sitting about him.

That night, after he had made love with Torben and his master had fallen quickly asleep, Rudi remained awake thinking about all the momentous changes



Rudi's fencing lesson



the last three weeks had brought in his life. He gathered from bits of conversation between Torben and the duke that they would be leaving Magdeburg soon, and this was one of the reasons Torben was pressing him so hard in the field. He must be ready. If they were on the road they wouldn't have the protection of castle walls. Images, visions, recollections, impulses chased each other through his overheated mind: a touch from Torben, a question from the Bishop of Reims, the dagger medallion which now never left his breast, a difficult step and parry with his sword. Sleep wouldn't come. At last, as the short June night was drawing to an end, he quietly left the bed to answer a call of nature. When he returned he crept silently through the antechamber where Bruno's cot had been placed before the outer door, and then he saw that their young attendant was also awake but was much more enjoyably passing his time, for in the dim light of pre-dawn filtering through the open window Rudi could make out rhythmic movement in the covers.

He walked over to the cot and sat down on the side of it and reached under the blanket to hold the hand that had suddenly gone still. Bruno's eyes opened and stared up at him, at first with startle and then with fear. But Rudi began stroking the hand gently and smiling, and at last the hand moved away and released into Rudi's grip a small but passionately sensitive boyhood root. This Rudi began to knead. An arm came out of the covers and locked around his neck, and now Rudi allowed himself to be drawn down against the boy's body. They kissed, and then he felt Bruno shudder and warm moisture pour over his fingers.

"Oh, thank you, Rudi!" the boy gasped. "I love you. I'll never love anyone else!"

Rudi held his small adorer against him for a few minutes, then whispered in his ear, "Torben and I will always be grateful for your loyalty and your service. You don't have to hide what happened from Torben. He approved."

"Hold me for just a little longer, Rudi."

"All right."

Rudi dozed, after his long, restless night, but Bruno remained intensely awake. Every second was a lifetime of happiness. Slowly, carefully so as not to awaken him, he moved his hands over Rudi's body. He breathed Rudi's breath. He buried his nose in Rudi's hair and inhaled its rich fragrance. Four more times his passion peaked with hardly a touch and poured out his offering upon the opposite, sleeping altar of the boy he worshiped. And so it was that Torben found them when, awakening just before the call to breakfast with no one beside him, he went in search of Rudi: he smiled down into the grateful eyes of the young Provencal boy gently protecting for him his beloved.

Raoul from Spain

Early one morning some ten days later Torben and Rudi set out on horseback for Reims. The sun was just up, the air still cool and fresh, as though the heavy dew of night had rinsed from it all the lingering smoke and dust of the worn-out day before. It was a fresh start for a new journey, but Rudi could feel only excitement – and pleasure that once again he would be visiting the land where he was born, where people spoke his mother tongue.

The weeks at Magdeburg had been the happiest ever in his life. He had been taught court manners by affectionate teachers; he had learned to fence. And he would certainly some day return to see his friends: the old man in the weapon shop, who, when he had bid good-bye, had clapped him on the shoulder and once again told him, “Take good care of your sword and it will take care of you,” Bruno, who had watched them ride out of the courtyard with tears streaming down his face (and the other pages laughing at him), Duke Franz, Heinz, who accompanied them on their way for an hour, acting just a little too cheerful.

“Yes, it was time to move on,” Torben said. Heinz had just turned back to the castle and Torben and Rudi were alone but for their mounts and pair of pack-horses. “Magdeburg is nice, but a man of action shouldn't stay there too long. Besides, Rudi, the only way you're going to get better with your sword is in actual combat.”

“At your side.”

“The first few times it had better be!”

By now the two of them had become welded into a single common existence, and Torben was still unable to understand how this had happened. Except for his deep attachment to Franz he had heretofore been happy to keep his life uncluttered with commitments of friendship and love. Yet here he was with a young page at his side who seemed to have become so completely a part of him that he couldn't imagine being alone any more – or even more free without him.

The road dipped down into a valley and, deep in forest, crossed on a stone bridge a little brook. They paused to let their horses drink and when Rudi looked at Torben there was such naked excitement, anticipation and devotion shining from his face that Torben suddenly recalled setting out from Copenhagen on his own first trip with Franz. How many adventures he had had since then, how many journeys, how many lovers! For Rudi it was all just beginning – and the boy could only imagine the best of it!

“This moment will never return, Rudi,” he said, “such a sudden feeling of being in perfect harmony with everything and everyone. We have to grasp such experiences as they come, engrave them in our memories and treasure them forever. Do you remember the ballad about the lad who saved King Charles from drowning?”

Rudi did, and now, as they set their four horses back on the road and broke out of the trees into sunlight, their voices joined again in song, causing a deer to pause at the edge of the woods and gaze after them in wonder.

They found an inn that night, but it was crowded and they had to share a room with an itinerant wheelwright from Kassel and his apprentice and so were forced to sleep separately, although within an arm's reach of one another. The next day, as they rode through increasingly wild countryside, they felt that

sapping tension in their loins which comes from not loving often and well enough, and around noon when they grew hungry Torben led them off the road and up a tumbling freshet until, deep in forest, they found a suitable place to lunch.

It was warm. Rudi dismounted and took off his boots and let his feet trail in the clear water of the stream. They ate the bread and wurst the innkeeper had provided them, and then Rudi lay back upon the grassy bank of the stream and looked at up at Torben with hunger in his eyes and they made love.

Torben was in no hurry to be on his way. He had planned to go no farther than Gosslar that night – less than four hours at the pace they were making. So they enjoyed their moment of *al fresco* intimacy, Torben stretched out on his back and Rudi lying with his head on Torben's chest, putting to his master all kinds of questions about the world they lived in.

“Tell me about the wars. Who's fighting whom? Who's right and who's wrong?”

That was not a simple matter to decide. In those days the German Empire was just a collection of principalities, each with its own army and more likely than not involved in some sort of military dispute with one or more of its neighbors; Felsen was hardly the exception. Some of the disputes were sincerely religious, the followers of Luther wishing to slaughter, in the name of Christ, the followers of the Roman Church of Pope Clement VIII, and vice-versa. More commonly it was a matter of economics and pride: who would control the land, or the death of whose father could be avenged, and how. The Hapsburgs, who presumably ruled this region, simply let everything happen as it would as long as it did not interfere with the stately pace of court life in Vienna.

In France, however, and in the low countries to the north, the wars were fought on a larger scale.

“There are three people you have to remember,” Torben said. “First is King Philip, actually Philip the Second, of Spain.”

“Spain's a long ways away,” Rudi said.

“Sometimes yes and sometimes no. He has ambitions in France so his armies are frequently to be found bivouacking somewhere south of Paris – and he rules over The Netherlands, too – very badly, from what I gather. He is a Catholic, which you are, too, presumably.”

“I don't know what I am. Do I have to be something?”

“No, but it's best you don't advertise it. Then there's Queen Elizabeth of England, a wise and wily ruler, a protestant of sorts, thus Philip's deadly enemy, or so he thinks. Finally, in a France divided between Catholics and Huguenots (which is what the protestants who follow Calvin call themselves there), only one man really stands out: King Henry the Fourth, Henry of Navarra. He's a Huguenot, at least for the time being, so, of course, the Catholics have to have a king of their own, an old cardinal of Bourbon whose name escapes me at the moment allied with Philip, of course. But Henry is for France, all the way through, and is the kind of king your country needs to unite it at last. Right now he has Paris under siege.”

“I don't know if I can remember all of that.”

“You will. What we're doing now will make you. The twenty-year-old shadow of the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day lies across the life of every Frenchman. Philip may be weak just now – his generals managed to get an army drowned when the Dutch opened their dykes on them in Holland and a few years back his admirals lost in the English Channel and the North Sea the largest war fleet ever assembled through sheer incompetence, but he is still very powerful, and just as convinced that every protestant is a devil who must be exterminated with fire and sword.”

“Huguenot, Lutheran, Catholic. What are you?”

“I am a Knight of the Dagger, and that is sufficient!”

“Then that's what I am. Who is the *real* king of France?”

“Henry of Navarra was so named by Henry the Third as he was dying. The Catholics would hardly agree.”

“So he's besieging his own capital?”

“That's right. But the part of France we will be crossing is relatively free of trouble. Our journey to Reims should be easy – boring, in fact.”

Their route led them through the Harz Mountains, Gottingen, Marburg, the pleasant hills of Hesse and down to Heidelberg. The cities became more and more interesting, the castles grew in magnificence. Everywhere Torben had a tale to tell Rudi, of recent battles, adventures or negotiations he had participated in. The castle at Heidelberg especially, hanging as it did like a huge yellow ornament on the green valley wall, was a wonder Rudi thought he would never see surpassed. And they were lucky enough to spend the night there, for Torben had a message to deliver. They were given a small room high in the north tower from which they could hear the rush of a wild stream.

Torben had learned that right after making love Rudi was, briefly, in his most receptive mood for learning about politics. That night, with their window thrown open to the fresh evening air, snuggled down under their eider-down comforter, they discussed once again the great figures that dominated European events at the time.

“Did you ever meet any of these people?” Rudi asked, nuzzling happily into Torben's neck, one leg thrown over his hips.

“Yes. Philip, many years ago when I was with Franz in Spain as his page. An austere man, not very pleasant. But hard-working, totally devoted to his God.”

“Smart?”

“He's made himself smart. I think he's probably the most able king Spain has ever produced, but I would guess he has had very little pleasure from it, as Franz has, for example, from, being Duke of Magdeburg.”

“And the others?”

“Henry of Navarra several times, mostly with his army in the field.”

“And you like him.”

“He's every bit as able as Philip, but without his destructive idealism.”

“I thought ideals were good things to have.”

“For yourself, maybe, but you cannot force them on somebody else, because they don't always fit. That is what Philip forgets in trying to impose Catholicism upon the dour merchants of Amsterdam and Leiden: they will burn before they drink communion wine, because they are convinced they will certainly burn afterwards, and for eternity, if they do.”

Rudi yawned, then rubbed his lips gently over Torben's collar-bone. “Queen Elizabeth?”

“No. But I did meet Drake once, who destroyed the Spanish fleet. He is very strange, very gruff. He has no manners at all, but he can be amazingly kind towards people he respects. He has been everything, including a pirate, and he's certainly the world's greatest explorer – I think that's probably when he's happiest, setting out to seas never crossed, sighting islands and continents and peoples never discovered before.”

“How can people be never discovered before?”

“By *us*, I mean. And then one time, in Utrecht, I met Maurits of Orange. Do you know who he is?”

But there was no answer from Rudi, whose breathing had now steadied in sleep. Torben put his hand around the boy's neck and moved it up into the tangled and fragrant curls lying against his cheek and thought himself the luckiest, and the richest, person in the world, far happier on this enchanted night, than

Philip or Elizabeth or Henry or Drake or Maurits.

A few days later they crossed into France. It was not, in those times, a sudden change from one culture to another. One evening, as they took their dinner, Rudi heard French being spoken by a couple of patrons of the inn, rough men who lived nearby; at the next inn, the next night, everyone was talking French.

Once again they played The Game. “All right, Rudi, five cut-throats have just come in that door, rapiers drawn, and they spot us here in the corner. What do we do?”

“Well, our horses are just outside this window where we have cleverly taken our table, anticipating just such an occurrence. I throw the table up, blocking an attack from the direction of the fireplace, while you engage the first swordsman. I, meanwhile, break out the window and leap onto the sill. When you're ready to follow me I throw my dagger at your opponent and jump down. Two seconds later we're both riding away.”

“With your dagger lost forever.”

“Oh, yes, I hadn't thought of that!”

The country was more gentle, now: long rolling fields, well-tended vineyards, replaced the mountains and forests of Germany. The roads became dustier, the weather warmer, the wine and the food better. At last they drew close to Reims and, coming over a rise, caught sight of the spires of its famous cathedral rising in the late afternoon haze.

“Unless I know the bishop badly we will be received with a graciousness and hospitality worthy of a royal court.” Torben said. “Our friend is as wealthy as he is powerful. He is greatly loved – and widely feared. Strangely enough, he is disliked mostly by Catholics.”

“But he is a bishop of the Church of Rome.”

“A very tolerant one, and that is not to the taste of the Catholic League, which would like to see the terrible Inquisition of Spain imposed in France. The bishop has strong ties to Saint Peter's Chair: Pope Clement is a personal friend, and this makes the bishop practically untouchable, at least through forces within the Church. There are rumors that, in secret, he supports Henry of Navarra and his efforts to build a new France under his rule.”

The bishop's residence was, in fact, a palace, and the personality of its owner was immediately apparent when Torben and Rudi were checked by the guards through the gates and gave their horses to two strikingly handsome stable boys.

From a first floor window came the bishop's sonorous voice: “Welcome, Torben, welcome Rudi, welcome to Reims!”

Inside they were relieved of their mantles and berets, once again by handsome pages, and then the bishop came hurrying down the stairs, his robes flowing softly in the light breeze, not stopping until he had given both of them a fond embrace.

“And how was your trip, dear Torben?”

“It was so easy that, had I not Rudi for companion, I should have fallen asleep in the saddle and been assassinated somewhere and never even reached Reims and your hospitality. “

“Which will begin by me showing you to your rooms immediately and having baths drawn, and then leaving you alone to repair for supper. In two hours, shall we say?”

Once again, as they went to their quarters, Rudi's eyes nearly popped out of

his head at the beautiful art he saw everywhere. There were statues of the finest Italian marble largely of youths and mostly naked. There were paintings, not just the naive triptychs of the middle ages, but fine examples of the new Dutch and Flemish art, the Spanish school and the best that Florence had produced in the last half-century. All in all, the product of great wealth, immodest (and somewhat self-indulgent) taste and an active, curious mind.

“And nothing in this household, Rudi, is more beautiful than the boys,” Torben said later, as, having bathed, loved and dressed in their court clothes, they took their places at the dining table.

“I have been fortunate,” said the bishop.

“Every family in Reims considers it an honor to have a son serve here for a year, or two, or three,” Torben continued. “It’s a fine recommendation to use later in his life. But tell me,” he said to the bishop, “isn’t your cupbearer new? I can’t remember seeing him before. If I had I’m sure his face would have stuck in my memory.”

The boy Torben spoke about looked to be about fourteen, not especially tall, but strongly built for his age and nicely shaped. ‘Probably with a bit of Spanish, or Moorish, blood in his veins,’ Torben thought, noticing the dark, sparkling eyes. Rudi, too, had been sneaking looks at him, and every time their glances met he had received a radiant smile in return.

“You are quite right. While I was away at Magdeburg he suddenly appeared on my doorstep with a letter from one of my former connections in Spain, and this is an ideal point in our conversation to tell you a story which will not only explain Raoul, for that is the lad’s name, but lead into the next task which must engage us all.”

The bishop said a few words in Spanish to Raoul, who nodded respectfully and looked with new interest at Torben and Rudi.

“Comprendo, Señor,” the boy said, and smiled once again.

“I have told Raoul that you are especially honored guests and he is to be assigned to your service as long as you remain with us.”

“We are most appreciative,” said Torben.

“Which I am afraid won’t be very long. Now, the story I promised. It is the tale of an old nobleman who died, poisoned by his own intolerance and suspicions, and the son he hated, and the grandson who hated him. It is the story of Vincent Châlons-sur-Marne.”

“Châlons is in your diocese, is it not?” Torben asked.

“It is indeed. In his younger days this elder son of an old, honorable family was a happy, well-balanced person closely attached to his brother Charles, three years his junior. His love of his brother was, in fact, so deep and possessive that when he accidentally discovered that Charles had no interest whatever in women, rather in young boys and especially a fifteen-year-old lad named Jean serving at the castle, this came as a terrible shock. There was a violent quarrel between the brothers, then a fight – fortunately no weapons were at hand – and Charles left the castle together with his young lover. Shortly thereafter Vincent received word that Charles had died by the hand of an assassin. The boy Jean, he heard, had apparently avoided a similar fate.

“Now, Vincent and I were of the same age, and it was I who later hid Jean when Vincent, placing upon the boy’s young shoulders complete blame for Charles’ ‘corruption’, as he thought of it, and death, tried to have him hunted down and destroyed. Jean married, while fairly young, had a daughter and died shortly thereafter during the plague. The daughter went to Spain, later married there herself, and she is the mother of Raoul. His father has just died. My connection in Spain knows not only my obligations but my tastes as well, and he said in his letter that, with Raoul’s good looks, the boy ought to feel right at home in my household, and I have to admit he was right.”

“So Raoul is half-French,” Rudi said.

“Yes. But to go back to the history of Châlons-sur-Marne. After Charles's death, Vincent isolated himself at the castle and, as the years passed, his oddness increased. He married and had a son, Arnaud, who grew up under his father's increasingly suspicious eye. But Arnaud was an independent lad and took the first opportunity he had to leave his ancestral home – he was no more than fourteen at the time. Count Vincent ordered his son's name cut out of the family Bible and forbade anyone from mentioning him again at Châlons-sur-Marne.

“From that point on everything went wrong for the count. His wife died. His estates were badly damaged in the Huguenot uprisings. He turned with fanatical enthusiasm to astrology, black and white magic and other curiosities of the superstitious world.

“One day a gypsy fortune-teller arrived at the castle. She evidently knew something about the old scandal in the house of Châlons for she predicted that history would repeat itself. 'Your grandsons will grow up as you and your brother grew up, but they will be more brothers than you were brothers. They shall separate, and one will die young, far from the other!'

“The count laughed at her, pointing out that he had no grandchildren at all, and had her thrown out of the castle. But a week later a soldier brought to him a pair of infant boys – twins but evidently not identical twins – together with a written message from Arnaud who, as he lay dying from battle wounds in The Netherlands, had decided that these, his only sons, should be raised as noblemen.

“Now the old gypsy's prophecy came back to Vincent; to it he added his own obsession: the younger would grow up with the same corrupt bending of the love instinct as had his own brother Charles. He forced the soldier to tell him which of his grandsons had been born last, and then ordered that he be removed and killed. The soldier carried the infant away to do the count's bidding and was never seen again.

“Francois, the presumed elder, was raised by his grandfather, but without love. And history did repeat itself to the extent that Francois *is* drawn to other males. But that, for our purposes at hand, is only incidental. Some time ago I learned, from one of my faithful connections in the Spanish capital, that Francois, now Count Francois of Châlons-sur-Marne since the death of his grandfather last year, has been kept in gloomy confinement in a Parisian monastery by Abbot Girardeux.”

“That's bad news for him,” Torben said, then, to Rudi, “Girardeux is one of the strongest, but most shadowy, figures of the Catholic League. He is also our sworn enemy.”

“Perhaps, Rudi,” the bishop continued, “you cannot understand the importance of Francois who, although a boy no older than yourself, is a powerful pawn in the military games being played across this country. With Francois in the hands of Girardeux, the League can claim this old and wealthy estate in its cause. But I know the boy; I have been his protector during all those years when he lived in misery at his father's castle, and I know he would cast his influence with us were he free to do so.

“But I see it is time for dessert and perhaps, Torben, we can continue with this history, and work out some solutions to the problems it has raised, after the meal is over and we have retired to my study. You'll be welcome too, Rudi, but if you would rather look around our city, Raoul could be your guide. He already knows it well enough to find his way back again, at least.”

The streets and taverns of Reims were still busy when, just before sunset, Rudi and Raoul emerged from the bishop's palace, both in the smartest of jackets and the most close-fitting breeches. It would have been difficult to find two more attractive youths anywhere in the city: blond head, dark head, blue eyes, black eyes, smiles that revealed even teeth of pure white, the easy, enthusiastic walk that hinted of enormous energy barely held in restraint. They had no common language, but they didn't need one to

exchange the warmth of feeling each felt for the other. All of the girls, and many of the men, stopped and stared. They were aware of the impression they created and, for this one brief evening, each allowed himself to enjoy it to the full.

They stopped in an inn and before they could even open their mouths two glasses of wine were pushed in their direction by a soldier. Rudi downed his at a gulp, and quickly had to wipe the tears out of his eyes; Raoul tried to imitate him but gasped in the middle of his swallow and made something of a mess of things. They were immediately seized by giggles and fled back onto the street.

A little later they found themselves passing through a small park, a kind of haven from the busy streets. Rudi dropped his arm to Raoul's waist and gave it a squeeze. Raoul responded by putting his arm on Rudi's shoulders. They emerged with mounded breeches, and when this gained them, variously, looks of disapproval, amusement and gentle longing by the people they passed, the boys burst out into giggles once more.

Darkness came. The crowds dispersed. Raoul indicated, by pointing and with gestures, that they should start back to the palace. A moment later, however, he stopped and looked about him. Then he took Rudi by the wrist and pulled him into another park they were passing, around a pond and into a thicket. There, in deep twilight, the dark boy threw both arms around Rudi's neck and clung to him and pressed a long, burning kiss into his lips.

By now they were both thoroughly aroused. Quickly their clothes fell, until they were standing absolutely naked locking together their bodies in the tenderest and closest embrace. Rudi let his hands play over the strong back and shoulders of his younger friend whose lovely face was turned up to him like a flower to the sun. There was a sweet smell as of honey on Raoul's lips. Slowly they sank into the carpet of grass. Now Rudi took great joy in imitating the opening gambit Torben had so often played with him: his hands searched lower on Raoul's back, found, then parted, the smooth buttocks and caressed between.

Then, without persuasion, murmuring his delight in his own tongue, Raoul turned on his stomach, lifted the domes Rudi had been exploring and turned back to look over his shoulder at Rudi with a big smile. Rudi nodded, readied himself, poised, touched, pushed, entered, backed a bit, pushed again, and this time slid home into ecstasy.

Torben and the bishop were just concluding their discussion when Rudi and Raoul returned to the palace. It was impossible not to see how happy and elated the two lads were. Torben spoke a couple of words to Raoul in Spanish. Raoul blushed. "It's obviously time," the kindly old clergyman observed, "for me to think about some company for my small protege. But now we must retire. There is much to do on the morrow."

When they were alone in their rooms, Rudi asked Torben what he had said to Raoul.

"I only asked if he didn't find it pleasant to have found a friend in you."

"You're not angry, then?"

"No, of course not."

"Because I would like to tell you all about it." And this Rudi proceeded to do, with great animation and delight. By the time he had finished they were lying side by side in bed.

"Well," said Torben, "I'm glad you find your extra outlets with boys your own age, more or less, rather than grown-ups. As for what happened this evening, I only hope it hasn't drained your interest in more love-making."

"Drained?" Rudi laughed and flung himself upon Torben and kissed him passionately on the mouth. "You forget my age. Raoul only warmed me up a little. It was just the soup course; now comes the

meat!”

Henry of Navarra

Dawn comes early in July in the north of France. Torben awakened first, then spent a quiet minute or two simply gazing at his young lover. Even in sleep Rudi was beautiful: sunlight streamed onto their huge canopied bed, turning Rudi's tousled hair into a burst of pure gold. From his closed eyes light-brown lashes curved sensuously over cheeks smooth with young life. The slightly opened mouth seemed suspended midway in a kiss, and now Torben bent his head and gently touched his lips to Rudi's.

Rudi stirred, rubbed his eyes, moved into Torben's arms for a few seconds of morning greeting and then rolled away.

"What now, Torben?" he said. "Can we stay here a few days?"

"I'm afraid not. We have a letter to deliver to the King and a boy to rescue from a monastery."

"What? You mean Francois of Châlons-whatever-it-is?"

"How are we going to get into Paris?"

"I don't know yet, but we can't do it lying in splendor here."

"And really it is splendid, isn't it, Torben?"

"I think you're turning into a luxury-loving, sensuous little ... "

"*I am not!* I'd much rather be fighting!" And Rudi jumped out of bed and struck a resolute pose, totally naked and quite unaware that his own sword of flesh was very much more in a state of readiness than his fighting rapier lying idly across a chair.

The bishop provided them with fine horses, fiery steeds that, held in check by two handsome stable lads, pawed the cobblestone courtyard and snorted clouds of condensed breath into the cold morning air.

Raoul had come to see them off. He shook hands with Torben, who mussed his dark hair. The two boys embraced each other.

"He says, 'Come back. Come back soon,'" Torben translated. Then Torben and Rudi mounted their horses.

"Godspeed," the bishop called from his upstairs window.

Torben touched the dagger medallion hanging at his throat, waved and, with Rudi at his side, they rode away.

Morning haze still covered the gentle landscape of northern France, patches of fog layering the little hollows. The damp and chill, however, soon wore off as the sun climbed higher. They rode all day, making good time, pushing their mounts hard, and paused for the night at a village inn just after the red sun sank before their eyes in the west. The next morning they were on their way again at dawn, in the same early morning chill, their fine horses still allowing them to put mile after mile behind them.

They had just come out of a small fog-hung valley when they were overtaken by a carriage hurrying along the road. The windows were covered with heavy drapes, but at the moment it thundered past the curtains parted on a face Rudi would never forget: Sigismund Vogel, the black valet of the late Count Konrad of Felsen.

"This is bad news," Torben mused. "His intentions are certainly not friendly toward either you or me."

“I'm sure he recognized us. He looked mad.”

“I know for certain that Felsen has had some connection with the Catholic League and Abbot Girardeux for years. We may well have an encounter before we reach Paris.”

They rested in an inn at Meaux, and they had hardly had a chance to sip their wine and break their bread when the door opened and the black valet and a small band of soldiers burst in led by a strongly-built officer with red hair with a distinctive gray streak at the side.

“Lepreaux!” Torben said, and sprang to his feet. Rudi followed him, drawing his sword. And then the peaceful tap-room was transformed into a grand melee of gleaming swords and struggling bodies. Torben and Rudi, with their backs to the wall, had to defend themselves against stabs and blows from every direction. Torben's skill and Rudi's enthusiasm held the soldier band at bay for a few minutes, but, obviously, they would sooner or later go down under the superior numbers.

Suddenly Rudi was no longer at Torben's side – he was climbing the stairs, fleeing in evident panic. Now Torben was engaged with Lepreaux, and, during a break in the battle, Vogel, the black valet, said, “We'll finish you first, Master Lerche, and then I'll carve up your young friend slowly and with pleasure and with his own dagger, you may be sure!”

But Torben saw that on the balcony upstairs Rudi was making his way inconspicuously toward a cleat which secured the enormous iron chandelier hanging above their heads. Rudi drew his dagger and began sawing at the ropes. Then, at a signal from Rudi, Torben sprang back and, with a horrible crash the whole cast iron apparatus came down, filling the inn with cries, dust, blood and general chaos.

Immediately, Torben caught Rudi's eye, sprang through a window into the inn yard, and found himself nearly knocked to his knees by Rudi, who had hurled himself from the balcony and used his master to break his fall.

“Thanks,” Rudi said, grinning, picking himself up off the cobblestone pavement.

“I survive Lepreaux and that villain Vogel, only to get nearly killed by my own page.”

“You taught me to improvise.”

“And you did magnificently. I'm proud of you. Your first real fight!”

Meanwhile they were releasing the soldier's horses and whipping them off down the road. Even the dray horses at the coach were put in a panic, and the last they saw of the carriage it was tottering crazily around a curve after its runaway team.

They mounted their own horses and galloped away just as the surviving soldiers limped out of the inn.

When they finally reined in their horses and resumed their normal pace, Torben groaned and said, "Whew! That was a close one. Now at least we know Lepreaux is working with Felsen and they have business in the capital. Only people on political errands travel the roads to Paris these days."

That evening they dined with the King, Rudi attending his master as usual. Henry of Navarra had made his siege headquarters in an inn called *Au Canari d'Or* just outside the city walls of Paris. He was a tall man with dark hair, a trim beard and a deceptively modest demeanor. He greeted Torben as though he were a treasured friend, although they had not met for years. Torben told him of their trip, of the attack by Lepreaux and the black valet. Then he handed the king the bishop's letter.

"So Philip is coming after all," the king said when he had finished reading. "Well, we shall greet him. Thank you for this message, and all the risks you took bringing it to me. As for the young Count of Châlons-sur-Marne, I shall turn you over to my spies. I am sure they can arrange for you to make an inconspicuous entry into the city."

And that they did, in the black hours just before the eastern sky lightened with gray. In civil wars, all sieges are leaky: patrols go out and come back; women bribe guards and slip into the arms of husbands or lovers in the attacking forces. Dressed as militia, Torben and Rudi infiltrated a sleepy squad returning after a guilty night of drinking and soon found themselves inside the city. Torben made his way easily to a large house owned by a certain wine merchant by the name of Jean-Paul Lucas. And there, at last, Rudi and Torben fell into a huge *lit matrimonial* and were almost instantly asleep.

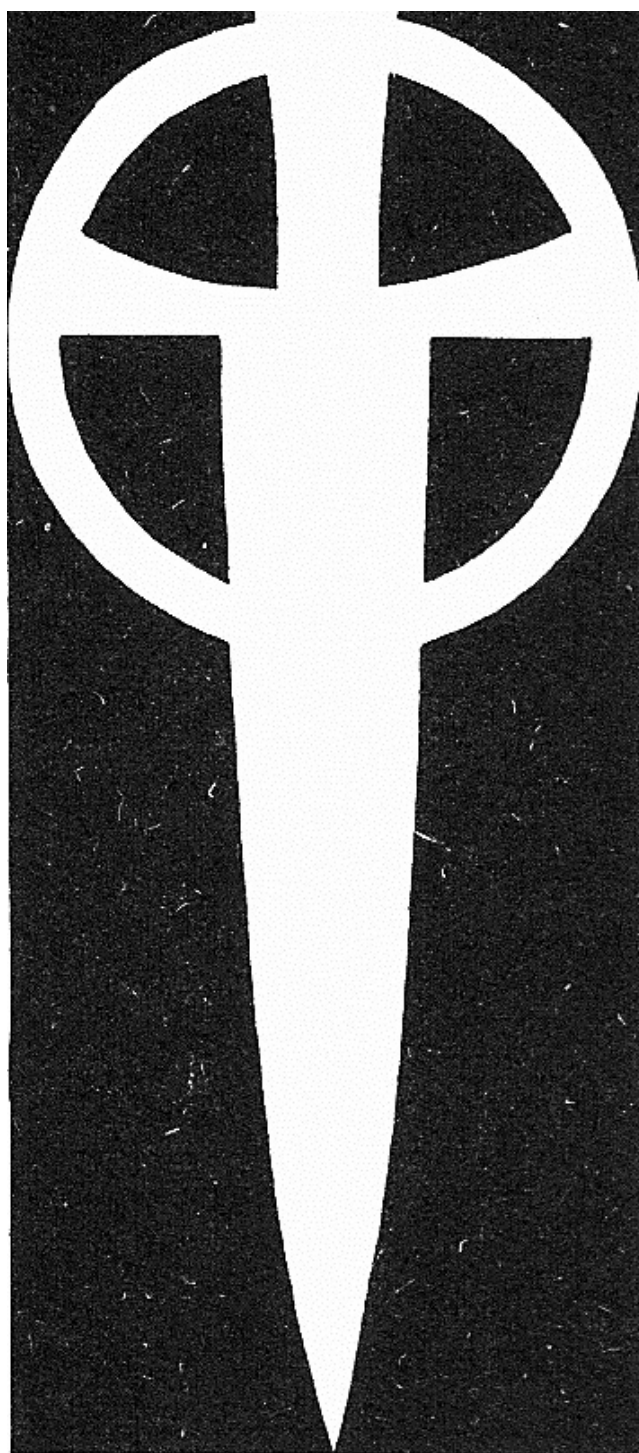
Paris was a sad city just then. Although there was no real starvation yet, the spirit had gone out of it. The little people, the small shop-keepers, workers, tradesmen, had nowhere to go, nothing to buy. Restaurants were closed, shops empty; people stood about and talked and didn't work. Unless you were a soldier there was little enough for anyone to do.

Around mid-morning Lucas awakened Torben and then he and Rudi went down to the dining room to discuss with him the rescue of young Count Francois.

"We will dress you as a couple of my competitor's men," Lucas explained. "It would perhaps be easier if you went in with one of my deliveries, but I wish to survive this venture myself. You will be bringing some wine from Dumont of Bordeaux – I have some of his barrels in my warehouse. At any rate the worthy Abbot Girardeux is supplied from many sources and his stewards cannot know all of our foremen by name. This afternoon perhaps you should call on the abbot and let him sample the wine and make arrangements for a delivery tomorrow."

And the three of them bent their heads and started planning.





RS

The Abbot's Prisoner

Not many people knew just how powerful the Abbot Armand de Girardeux really was. For years he had been casting his net of intrigue, extending it over France, Spain and great parts of the rest of Europe, and now he sat in Paris under siege, a great fat spider harvesting his web. Girardeux was so powerful that in France only Julien de Montferrat, Bishop of Reims could bear comparison with him, and the two, for reasons of ambition, temperament and philosophy, were sworn enemies. Both had visions of gaining a cardinal's hat. Only one would ever wear it: he who supported the victor in the civil war.

The abbot was in conference with one of his Spanish acquaintances, a Jesuit priest by the name of Jose Mendez de Guimarez, when his valet announced the arrival of a new consignment of wine from Bordeaux, and would it please the Very Reverend Sir to have a look at the bottles.

Girardeux heaved his enormously fat body out of the sofa where he had arranged himself and, observing that man does not exist by the spirit alone, he settled himself at his desk and asked that the wine merchant be shown in.

“Jacques evidently has engaged a new Parisian agent,” he said, as Torben and Rudi, dressed as simple citizens, were shown into his presence. “Where do you two come from?”

Torben replied that they were distant relatives of Monsieur Dumont, having fled to the Catholic haven of Paris because of all the trouble the Huguenots were stirring up in the provinces.

Girardeux grunted, then turned to Rudi. “Your face looks slightly familiar to me, though. Have you ever been in Paris before, lad?”

Rudi shook his head and answered in the broad peasant dialect of northeast France that this was his first visit to the capital, for sure.

Girardeux continued to stare at them, then shrugged his shoulders and, with his Jesuit friend, turned to the important business of sampling the wine.

Back with Lucas that evening, with a firm order for two barrels of Bordeaux, Torben, Rudi and Lucas went over their plans. The barrels were to be made ready on the morrow: one with a false bottom containing hand weapons and tools, another with padding inside and cleverly disguised breathing holes.

“Suppose he's too big?” Rudi said. “Suppose Francois is hurt so he can't bend up double to get in it?”

“Yes, lad, there are risks,” Lucas said. “Anything we do is going to be dangerous, and Girardeux keeps a tight watch at his monastery. They could learn that I am part of the plot – they undoubtedly will in time. But let us hope and pray that by then the siege is ended and King Henry is on his throne.”

That night, after Torben and Rudi had made love and the boy had taken his usual repose with his head on Torben's shoulder and a leg thrown across his hips, Rudi was struck once again with wonder at all that had happened to him in the past months, the dramatic events which had taken him first to Magdeburg, then Reims and now Paris under siege, especially of Torben and the good friends he had made. Tomorrow there would be a new adventure, a daring rescue of an important hostage. Life was good; life was full; life was all that a 15-year-old boy could ask of it. His fingers gently found his necklace and moved to the little dagger upon it. He smiled to himself and fell asleep.

There were no difficulties getting into the monastery the following morning with the wagon and two dray horses and the wine barrels. At the gate they were met by a rather pompous major-domo hung in lace and reeking of perfume. Rudi nudged Torben, rolled his eyes heavenward and twitched his nose. Torben burst into laughter.

“It is not becoming for a wine agent to be drunk delivering his spirits,” the major-domo announced, as though to a crowd of admirers. “You may follow me.”

“We shall bring along our two casks now,” Torben said, then to Rudi, “Boy, fetch them down – gently! If you break one open you’ll lick up every drop!”

Rudi’s eyes twinkled merrily for a moment, and then he eased first the cask with the tools in it, then the one with the breathing holes, down the plank and into the gloomy old monastery.

Back and back they went, Torben and Rudi each rolling a cask behind the waddling major-domo. They passed storage rooms piled high with obsolete weapons and worn out furniture, even a torture chamber whose idle instruments raised the hair on the back of Rudi’s neck.

“This must be your jail,” Torben observed.

“It is,” the major-domo said, “and you and the lad better look smart or the abbot will put you in it.”

A short time later they came to the wine cellar, cool, musty, with that unmistakable odor of old oak and spilled samplings drawn off over the centuries. There the majordomo left them with a handkerchief held to his nose, and as soon as he was out of earshot Torben said in a loud voice,

“Well, lad, it will be hard work exchanging these casks. How about a little drop before we begin?”

In an equally loud voice Rudi replied, “But, Master, it would be only polite to offer a glass to that gentleman who led us here.”

“But he has left.”

“Well, maybe there are others....”

There was another. The jailer, who had been lurking in the passageways, now came forth, a brutish man with a smashed nose and hair that seemed to grow sporadically on his skull in unhealthy patches of gray.

Torben pulled a bottle from his cloak and drew the cork.

“The kiss of dew on the grapes of my native valley. Here, have a sip. A jailer’s lot must be a dry one, even though his underworld be hard by the casks.”

“Thank you, good Sir.”

“But I don’t suppose in a monastery you have many prisoners, your master being concerned with spiritual matters rather more than with politics.”

“That is right, sir. Only one, sir.”

“A wretched heretic, I suppose. A Huguenot. Better the abbot burn him than bury him.”

“No, sir, he is chained in yonder cell. He is just a boy, rather like your helper that was here a moment ago....”

The ‘helper’ was, in fact right behind him at that moment, with a sand-bag raised high. Now the sand-bag fell on the jailer’s head and the man toppled over unconscious and crashed to the floor with a jingle of keys.

“Quick – the rope and the gag,” Torben whispered to Rudi, and in no time the jailer was trussed up like a Leipziger sausage ready for smoking.

It didn’t take long to discover Girardeux’s political prisoner. They found the right key at last and entered a cell not much larger than the length of a man in either direction. A small barred window gave onto an interior court, letting in a dim reflection of the brilliant summer day outside. There was a dish of

water on the floor. Against one wall was a hard wooden shelf covered with a thin mattress, and on it rested an even thinner boy, absolutely naked, one leg chained to the wall and his two wrists joined together with another chain.

“I won't!” the naked boy said, before Torben and Rudi had had a chance to speak. “You can starve me, you can rape me again, you can whip me, but I will never sign that paper!”

“Hush!” said Torben. “We come to help you.”

“As though I hadn't heard *that* before!”

Rudi could see that the boy was cold. “How long have they had you naked?” he asked.

“You should know! Get out!”

Torben leaned over the boy and started speaking very quickly. “We come from the Bishop of Reims and King Henry the Fourth. We are not friends of Girardeux.” As Torben explained the plan of escape hope slowly replaced the despair which had been etched so deep in the boy's face a moment earlier.

“Reims? The bishop? Is he alive? They told me....” Tears sprang into the boy's eyes and he couldn't continue.

“He couldn't be more so,” Torben said. “But now we must work fast. How often does the jailer have visitors?”

“Not often.”

“Good. Now hold still, and pray we're left alone.” While Torben dragged the inert body of the jailer into the cell and then rolled in the barrel which had been prepared for Francois, Rudi went to work with a steel saw on the boy's ankle

François in his cell



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band.

“Do you hurt much?” Rudi asked.

Francois shook his head. “Not now.”

“I see marks....” Rudi dropped his eyes to some welts and bruises and sores on the naked boy's chest and backside.

“Beating me was the second thing they tried. But I would just pass out, and then I couldn't sign a thing.

“What were you supposed to sign?”

“A declaration stating that all authority over the estates of Châlons-sur-Marne was to be entrusted to the Abbot de Girardeux as my guardian as long as I remained a minor. At first they tried to humiliate me. In the abbot's own apartment, as that hypocrite watched with his lips wet – he's too fat to see if he's ever aroused *down there!* – they tied me up, raped me, and with their hands they, well, made me give of myself time after time, until I was so sore that, even when they did it with the gentlest oils and the lightest grip, it was too raw to respond any more. And all the time they called me terrible names. So they threw me into this cell, and the next time they tried beating me. Every day I would be dragged up to the abbot's study, the declaration placed before me with a quill dipped in ink, and every day I refused to sign it. Last week I got so mad that when he bent over me with that flabby red face of his I spat in it – that's when I got those bruises you just noticed. So next he said he would starve me into signing. I'm a little thinner than I usually am. I don't usually look this skinny....”

“How did the abbot find you? Châlons is under the bishop's protection, isn't it?”

“I was kidnapped in Spain. I was lured down there looking for someone.”

At last the ankle band was cut through and pried open and Francois swung his legs down off the bed.

“I don't know if I can stand,” Francois said. “I've been so long without food I feel a little dizzy.”

“That's all right,” Torben said. “You need only crawl in that barrel and we'll do the rest.”

On their way out, rolling the casks toward their waiting wagon, Torben and Rudi received a nasty surprise. They nearly collided with Lepreaux and Sigismund Vogel, who were hurrying toward the abbot's apartment.

“Confound it, man, can't you look where you are going?” Vogel swore.

“Pardon, Master, pardon,” Torben said subserviently.

Rudi, however, was bending over his cask, and Lepreaux gave his shapely bottom a sound whack with the flat of his sword. Rudi jerked upright, reached for his non-existent rapier and felt Torben's restraining hand on his arm. Rudi let the anger settle in him but, when the men's backs were turned, couldn't resist making a lewd hand gesture after them.

They rode out of the monastery, with Torben in the driver's seat handling the reins. They bypassed the house of Lucas and, as arranged, fetched up in an old warehouse on the River Seine. Rudi rolled the barrel containing the young Count of Châlons-sur-Marne off the wagon and inside while Torben drove the rig away to lose it in another section of Paris.

“I'll be back before dark,” Torben explained. “There's wine and bread and cheese – you know where they are. Treat our young friend gently.”

Francois fainted when Rudi helped him out of the cask. Rudi carried him over to a pile of straw and revived him with some cold water on his face.

“I'm afraid we didn't bring clothes,” he told Francois, “We never thought they'd keep you naked. Here, take my shirt.”

Francois shook his head. “Sit down beside me.”

“In a minute. First, a little to eat.”

The abbot's prisoner was almost too weak to tear the heavy bread and hold the wine bottle to his lips.

Rudi helped him. The wine went quickly to the starving boy's head, but instead of it making him happy he just collapsed back against the straw with great tears rolling down his cheeks.

"What's wrong? What can I get you?" Rudi asked in some concern.

"Everything's wrong. And what I want more than anything in the world you can't possibly get."

"But you're almost free."

Francois nodded. "Lie beside me. I'm cold again."

Rudi cleared away the food, then lowered himself down into the straw beside Francois. Soon they were in each other's arms, the naked boy absorbing body warmth and courage from Rudi's embrace and Rudi finding himself duskily aroused by the attractiveness and the needs of the other. In a short time Francois' shivering stopped and he slept. Then Rudi kissed the boy on his lips, stripped off his shirt, covered Francois with it and went to the door to keep watch.

When Torben returned toward evening it was impossible for Rudi not to show his love, or hide the bulge that appeared in his ill-fitting breeches as soon as his master stepped through the door. Torben had brought with him a pair of rough trousers, a working man's shirt and some shoes, as well as a warm meal for the three of them consisting of rich vegetable soup, stew and apples for dessert. Rudi spread their dinner on a make-shift table of boxes and they settled before it, with a candle lit. Torben proposed a toast "to King Henry, to the bishop, to the count our guest, to us, and to the future".

"Tell me," Francois asked, "are you two, well, special friends?"

Torben and Rudi regarded him silently for a moment, then Torben said, seriously, "Of course we are."

Francois turned his eyes toward Rudi. "I thought so, from the very kind and natural way you took care of me this afternoon."

Torben laughed. "So, when the cat was away..."

"No, I don't mean that any such thing happened, but if I'd been feeling better it might have."

"*Would* have," Rudi teased.

"I had a special friend, too," Francois said seriously.

"Bernhard was my teacher at the castle. As a little boy I worshiped him. He would answer everyone of my questions, about why there weren't unicorns any more and what makes wheat grow. Then one night when I was about eleven I had a nightmare and I awakened to a terrible thunderstorm. The lightning was so constant I could see without even a candle, and I ran to the room where my teacher slept and crawled into bed with him. Well, the storm didn't last very long and I soon forgot about my dream, but then I found that something I'd been locking my legs around was a part of him, and from then on we were lovers.

"The next three years were wonderful. Every night after the torches were snuffed and the castle was quiet Bernhard would come to my room. Sometimes I was already asleep and I would awaken in his arms, or with his mouth on me, or with that root of him gliding inward to join us as only lovers can be joined. And during those years, I grew, too, so that I soon had something I could fill him with as well.

"Until one day, while we were out hunting, we paused in the woods and, thinking we were alone, we kissed. Someone saw us. My grandfather found out. I was whipped as I had never been whipped before, and only the bishop's intervention prevented them from casting Bernhard into prison to die there from hunger. Instead he was thrown out of the castle like a dog and I never saw him again.

"Since then the bishop has been my protector. He had Bernhard smuggled out to another country. Once in a while, at rare intervals, the bishop was able, during confession, to bring me a message from one part or another of the world. Bernhard had become a soldier. Then I heard he had been killed in the war, and for a whole year I grieved and cried myself to sleep every night.

"That wasn't quite the end, however. After my grandfather died Girardeux wanted me and he knew he

couldn't capture me at Châlons, so he arranged for one of his spies to bring me a message that Bernhard lived and was waiting for me in Spain. How he found out about my love I'll never know. I left – and fell into his trap. Within a week I was in that cursed monastery standing before him refusing to sign his declaration. And Bernhard, he told me with real pleasure, really was dead. Which now, in my heart, I know.”

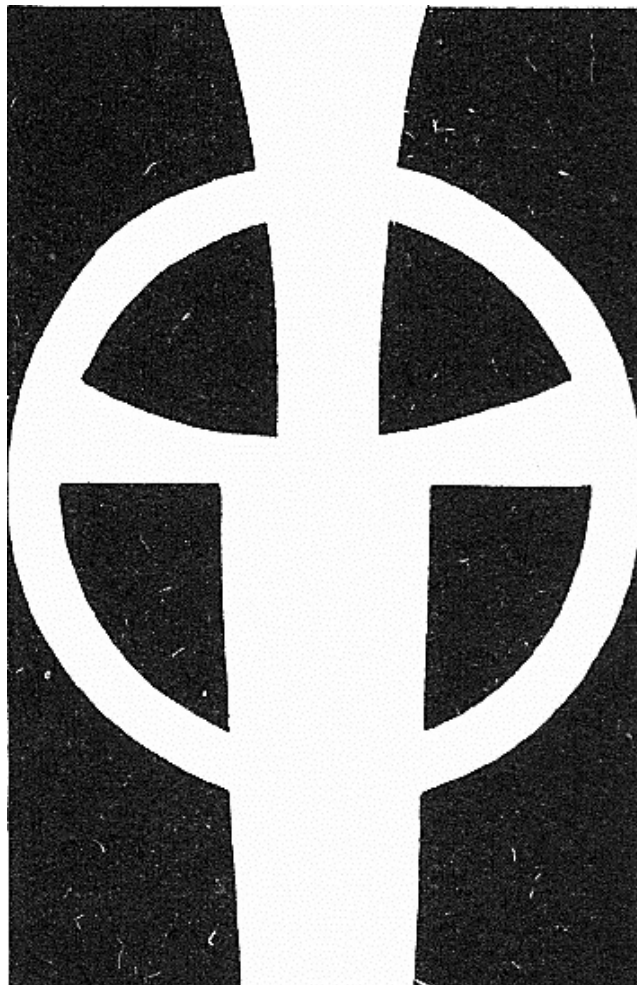
As they had eaten and talked it had grown dark outside, so that their table was lit only by the candle. Torben got up and peeked out the door.

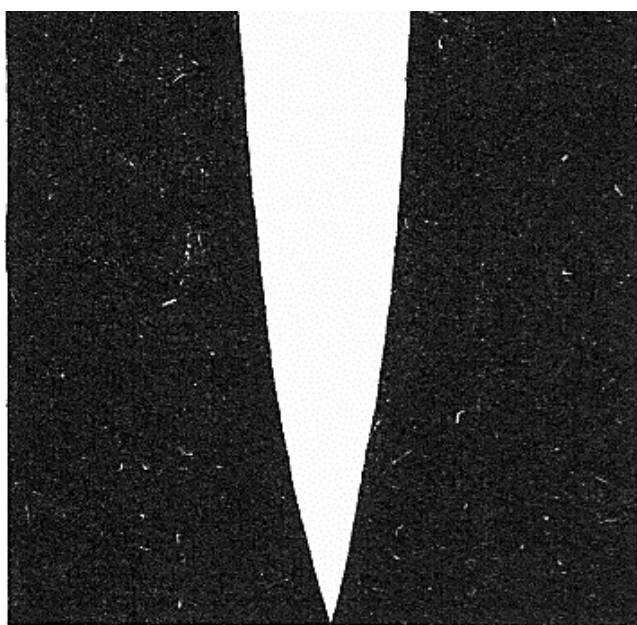
“We can leave now,” he said. “Rudi, help Count Francois into that little skiff at the cargo door. Can you stand, do you think?”

“I'll try,” Francois said. “And, Torben, you needn't be so formal as to call me by my title.”

“I was according you the respect you deserve, as a lover among other things. But I am glad to be welcomed to more intimate terms.”

Snuffing out the candle they made their way to the big warehouse doors which gave onto the river quay. It was a fine summer evening, made sad only by the apathy of siege. They settled themselves in the skiff and then quietly rowed out into the current. They passed out of Paris near Billancourt, running the apathetic river patrols by hugging the dark shore, and soon they were safe, in territory occupied by the king.





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The Incendiaries

Francois recovered quickly once they found an inn and could supervise the preparation of the right kind of foods for him – broths at first, then chicken and vegetables, and finally meat. Torben and Rudi found him a kindly boy, even jolly and animated at their evening meals, although frequently some turn of the conversation would remind him of his dead lover and then sadness would creep into his eyes and stay there until Rudi or Torben would distract him somehow back to conviviality.

As Torben was often out during the day conferring with the king and his counselors, the two boys spent much time in one another's company. Their backgrounds were, of course, very different, yet they found this merely fed an enormous curiosity each had about the other and the lives they had led. Rudi wanted to know all about the estates of Châlons-sur-Marne, Francois about living off the land as a runaway twelve-year-old in the Black Forest. As Francois's health returned, so did his virility, and now, as they walked about the sunny fields and pastures outside the village, Rudi saw a frequent rising in the young count's peasant breeches. At last one day when they settled in a copse, Francois put a comradely arm around Rudi's shoulders and a moment later they were in a lover's embrace.

It was always, for Rudi, different when he did it with a boy of his own age; it was lighter than with Torben, more playful, usually quite spontaneous and certainly less meaningful – except that this time it served to cement their friendship. When they rolled apart Francois said, “Thank you, Rudi. I needed that so much!”

Rudi laughed, and pounded his friend on his shoulder. “The pleasure was mine!”

But Francois was serious. “I want us to be bloodbrothers. Have you your dagger, Rudi? Of course you do. Here, on your arm and my arm, make a little cut...”

From then on they coupled somewhere nearly every day and Torben, rather than being jealous, was pleased. “Now I can get some sleep for a change,” he teased. “I'm an old man of twenty-five, so three times a night is really all I need.” And, indeed, master and page had fallen into a pattern of making love first upon retiring, again in the darkest hours when for both of them it was almost a continuation of sleep, an enactment of dreams and a fending off of the devil world that always seemed closer then. Finally with the awakening birds and the graying of the eastern sky, they greeted each other in embrace again and with their turgid masculinity welcomed together with the release of feelings stored within them the advent of a new day.

Events couldn't wait on the total recovery of Francois. King Henry of Navarra had an important message for Julien de Montferrat, Bishop of Reims; he gave them fresh horses and ordered them on their way. That night they dared not go to an inn; Torben led them off the roads and to the cottage of an old acquaintance.

He was an ancient forest ranger of a private estate and he had become considerably enfeebled since Torben had last seen him. Nevertheless, when the three young people rode up to the little house and hallooed their arrival, the old man burst into wrinkled smiles and welcomed them with all the hospitality it was within his simple means to provide.

“Ah, Torben, once again you come to France. And with such jolly companions. Come in, come in. There must be mischief about if you desert the road and the inns for my poor roof, but the hard and troubled times are my gain, I see. How is your master, Duke Franz? Here, let me help you down....” And so he shook hands all around and went chattering off into his cottage and began immediately to prepare a delicious supper. He cut thick slices of venison and poured over them a rich sauce spiced with forest leaks and chestnuts and even truffles from around the roots of the great beech trees.

After supper, when Torben and the ranger fell to reminiscing about old adventures in front of the fire and Rudi was listening with wide-eyed fascination, Francois wandered out into the forest to be by himself for a few minutes, to think about Bernhard and even cry a little. Tears had become a habit he didn't seem to be able to break, despite his new friendships and what should be an infinitely happier future. Even in his moments of intimacy with Rudi he found it was often Bernhard he was imagining; once he had even called Bernhard's name at some peak of his excitement. Rudi had been understanding and had only said, “I would be thinking about Torben, too, if it wasn't that I will be lying in his arms again tonight.”

Francois stayed out longer than he had intended. When he started back it was dark, and then he noticed something orange in the night sky in the direction of the ranger's hut. He picked up his pace. The orange glow grew brighter, and now he began to run. When he topped a rise he saw that the cabin was afire, smoke billowing out the door and windows and flames licking along the thatched roof.

He raced into the clearing, sprang through the door and nearly stumbled over the body of the ranger, who had evidently died on his own threshold from a horrible slash across his face. Then, in the orange light of the flames, he saw in the middle of the floor Torben slumped on his stomach with the handle of a great black dagger protruding from his back. The boy ran over and dropped to his knees. Torben was alive, if unconscious. Francois tore away Torben's shirt, and a quick inspection told him that the knife had been deflected by a shoulder-blade so it had neither pierced his heart nor entered a lung. He carefully drew it out and, choking in the gathering smoke, dragged Torben out through the door. Then ran back into the hut to look for Rudi.

But search as he would he never found another body. And soon the flames made it impossible to stay inside any longer. He rushed out and, summoning all his strength, he carried Torben in stages, pausing frequently to rest; far into the forest where, he reasoned, anyone returning to the site of the ambush would never find them. He made the unconscious man as comfortable as he could, and then, utterly exhausted, fell asleep himself.

For a whole day Torben was in delirium, calling for Rudi in French and a number of languages Francois didn't understand. Francois changed the dressings on Torben's wound, built a small shelter out of branches and leaves and then, remembering Rudi's tales of how he had lived in the Schwarzwald, went scavenging for food and brought back berries and nuts and even some edible mushrooms which he recognized as being safe from his rambles in the woods of Châlons.

On the third day Torben's fever subsided and his eyes cleared and they were able to exchange their recollections of the terrible attack.

Sigismund Vogel, black valet from Felsen, had been following them with Lepreaux and a small band of armed men. Their ambush in the cottage had taken them very much by surprise. The old ranger had been cut down immediately. Vogel had shouted that he wanted the boy taken alive, and even though Rudi had fought his very best and two of the soldiers had been forced to leave the fight with blood pouring from their wounds, the boy was soon overpowered. Torben had engaged Lepreaux and fought so skilfully that the situation had almost been saved. Then he had felt a burning pain in his back and fallen senseless to the floor.

“No doubt that was Vogel,” Torben said bitterly, “the true assassin stabbing me in the back.”

It was a sad return to Reims when, a few days later, a simple farmer's cart pulled into the courtyard of the palace of the bishop, and Francois, wearing once again the clothing of a peasant boy, helped Torben down to the ground. That night they ate in the chambers Torben had shared with Rudi such a short time ago, Torben propped up with pillows in the great canopy bed and Francois and his guardian at an exquisite Florentine table beside him.

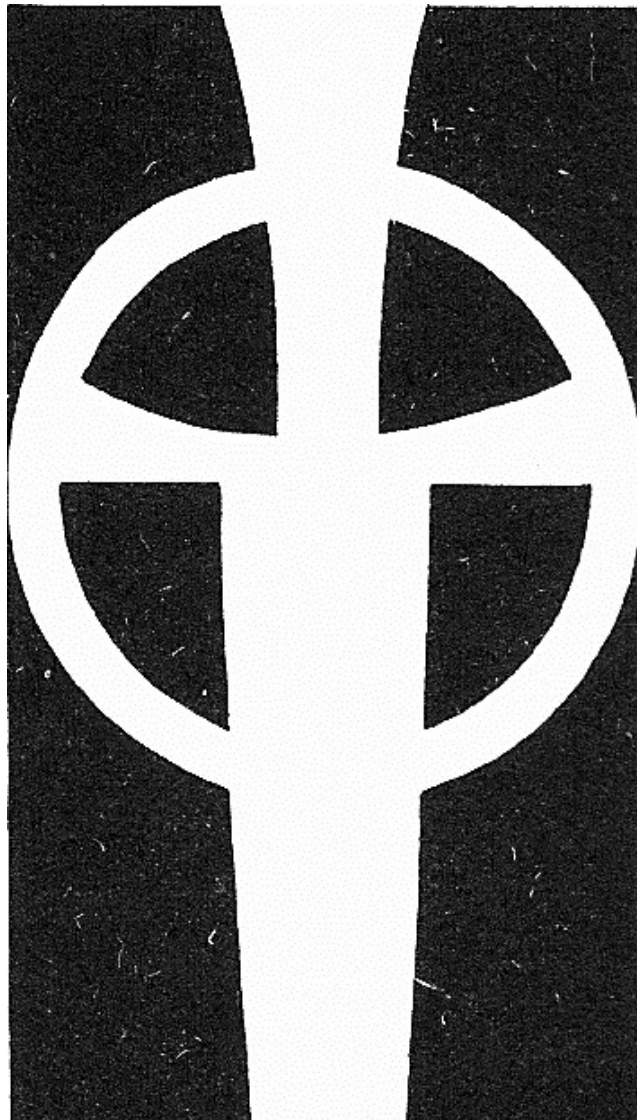
“I have read the king's message,” Bishop de Montferrat said, “and I think it is extremely good news for us. Perhaps it even means this terrible civil war will be ended soon.”

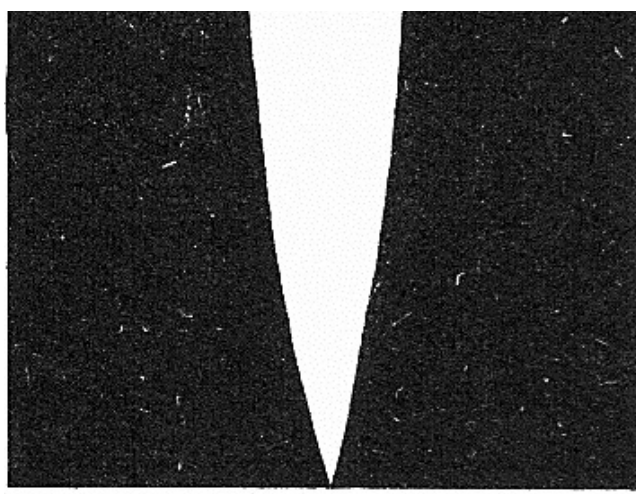
“How so?” asked Torben.

“Henry of Navarra shows signs of being willing to give up his Huguenot heresy and take on the true faith, although...” and here the bishop's eyes sparkled with amusement “...his reasons are perhaps not as spiritual as one might wish. He writes, 'Paris may yet be worth a mass!'"

They tried to keep up a civilized conversation, but Torben kept lapsing into silence, partly out of weariness and partly out of deep worry over Rudi.

“The first thing is to get you back in shape again,” the bishop said. “Meantime, a week ago, when you didn't appear as expected, I dispatched a rider to Magdeburg with a couple of lines to Duke Franz. I imagine he will be here before you are well. Then we will plan our search for Rudi.”





The Little Spy

When Rudi, gagged and hands tied behind his back, witnessed Vogel sneak behind Torben and, with the rapidity of a snake, plunge a knife in his master's back, his whole world had collapsed about him. By the time Lepreaux slung him across his horse and galloped away from the burning cottage he was nearly unconscious. He remembered later being tied onto a horse of his own, having a mantle draped over his shoulders to hide his bound wrists and then thundering along little-used forest paths, streaking through villages where the few inhabitants still out in the night crossed themselves and hurried indoors.

It was a completely apathetic boy they released a little later from his saddle and lifted down to the smooth cobblestones of a city courtyard. With a hand under each arm they dragged Rudi through a doorway, up a flight of stairs and into the presence of a grandly dressed nobleman, who said simply to his captors, "Well, tell me."

"Sir, with my own hands I have slain the man who murdered your brother, Count Konrad. He will trouble us no more."

Had Rudi been in his right mind he would have quickly recognized the surviving Count of Felsen. Reinhard had the same sneer as his late brother, the same flat face and arrogant eyes.

"Good. And this is young Francois of Châlons-sur Marne," Reinhard said.

Upon hearing his friend's name, Rudi stirred himself to look about the room but found he was alone with Vogel and Lepreaux and the count.

"No, my Lord," said Vogel, "this is the page who stabbed me with his dagger at Magdeburg."

"What?" Count Reinhard said. "Your message was that you had captured 'the boy!'"

"I did. He stands before you."

"I wanted the other one, you fool."

"There was no other one, my lord..."

"Did Girardeux not tell you that his prisoner had escaped?"

"Yes, but..."

"And didn't he tell you it was a young count and he had been smuggled out in a wine barrel by a man and a boy dressed as country peasants?"

"I did wonder at the time. But I swear there were only three of them in the cottage. I'm sorry I wasn't more clear as to who the boy was, but I knew you would want to avenge his role in Count Konrad's death."

"I'm not interested in vengeance, I'm interested in Francois of Châlons-sur-Marne."

"Perhaps this boy knows something of him. If he does we'll have it out of him soon enough."

Count Reinhard sighed. "Oh, very well. He's no other use to me." He started to leave, then he hesitated, turned back, stepped to Rudi, grasped the boy by the hair, turned his face up and stared into it coldly. For just a moment there was a spark of anger in Rudi's blue eyes, then they lapsed again into apathy.

"I don't share my late brother's lust for page boys," Count Reinhard said, "but I know enough about it to realize that this one will bring a handsome price in the right quarters. Perhaps I'll use him to payoff an

old debt we have....”

“After we find out what he knows.”

The count shrugged. “You can try. No scars, however. He must survive, still looking pretty.”

But survive he almost didn't, and it had nothing to do with any mistreatment Rudi might have received at the hands of Lepreaux or Sigismund Vogel. A week earlier, on one of his walks with Francois through the woods near Paris, he had thrown his dagger at a rather lethargic rabbit. The beast had died instantly, but in cleaning it Rudi had cut himself very slightly, and the blood of the dead rabbit had carried a tiny microbe. A few of these entered Rudi's veins. By the time Rudi was standing before Count Reinhard of Felsen, exhausted and distressed in extreme, they had multiplied a million fold, and before Lepreaux was able to begin his inquisition the boy passed into a deep swoon from which, mercifully, perhaps, he was soon quite unable to be roused.

Not long after Francois and Torben arrived in Reims an anxious looking young nobleman and his handsome page galloped into the courtyard of the bishop's palace, sprang off their foaming steeds and dashed inside. Duke Franz of Magdeburg-Saale and Heinz were received warmly by Bishop de Montferrat and shown immediately to the room where Torben was sitting in dull depression, recovering well from his stab wound and loss of blood but unable to stir himself to any kind of action.

“Torben,” Duke Franz said, “we came as soon as we could. The bishop has told us about Rudi. We'll find him if he's to be found, I promise.”

“You may as well have remained at home. Rudi will be dead by now. Vogel will never let him survive.”

Duke Franz took Torben's hand and held it and, looking deeply into the eyes of his former page and lover; said, “Do you remember when I might have had the same thoughts about you? In Spain, after my troubles in Malaga and you suddenly disappeared? You were younger, even, than Rudi is now. But you were intelligent and resourceful, and Rudi is intelligent and resourceful. No, we will find him. But now I must rest, and so must Heinz.”

Youth can't stay indoors for very long on a fine summer day. The next morning, while the bishop and Torben and Franz were closeted in conference, Raoul took Francois and Heinz for a look around the city. In his newly acquired broken French he pointed out not just the magnificent cathedral but other sites of more immediate interest to his companions: the square where criminals were hung, the houses of pleasure, the military barracks, the markets and the tavern where he and Rudi had drunk their given glasses of wine, with such comic results. Jostled by the crowds, smiling in the gracious sunshine, they lost themselves in the happy fact that they were three boys together. Free for the moment of cares. Only once did Raoul nearly lose his composure. They were passing the park where he and Rudi had met in moonlight and naked happiness only a few short weeks before, and he suddenly went silent in the middle of a sentence. Heinz looked at him for a moment, was about to speak, when Raoul caught hold of himself and resumed his flood of ungrammatical French. That memory of Rudi was a private one and he didn't feel like sharing it yet with the other two.

They were just about to turn onto a new street when suddenly Heinz froze, caught Francois and Raoul by the sleeve and pulled them back from the corner.

“Vogel!” he whispered, “He's in Reims! That means maybe Rudi.... Look, Raoul, he doesn't know you. Come here.” He put an arm on the young Spaniard's shoulders and drew him forward until they could both peek around the building, “In the black suit, talking with that scruffy looking soldier – probably one of Lepreaux's. See the man I mean?”

Raoul nodded.

“Hurry after him and try to find where he's staying. Francois and I will run back to the bishop's palace.” Raoul nodded once again, and then took off after the black valet of Felsen like a blood-hound on the trail of his quarry.

The information Heinz and Francois brought with them was the first good news to reach Torben's ears since the ambush; he rose from his bed and struggled into his clothes, and it was a very much more alert, if still somewhat weak, swordsman who faced Raoul when, a half-hour later, the boy rushed in streaming with sweat to inform them that Vogel had gone into the house of one Brigard, a baker, close to the northern tower.

“Excellent,” said Torben. “May I make a suggestion?” He turned his eyes to Bishop de Montferrat. “Raoul is your ward so you may veto the plan, but Raoul is the smallest of all of us, and probably the nimblest. He also has the advantage of not being known by any of our enemies. My idea is this, that he return to the house of the good baker Brigard and see what he can find out, who is staying with Sigismund Vogel, if possible even what they are saying to one another. Do you think you can do that, Raoul?”

“I don't know, but I'll try. For Rudi I will certainly try.” They quickly decided that it was too dangerous to capture the black valet and torture out of him information about Rudi: Vogel might not talk; others might be alerted by his disappearance and disappear themselves. Torben's plan seemed the best, and when Raoul asked his guardian's permission, the bishop only said,

“You have already done so well we had planned on giving you a little surprise after we dined this evening. Your willingness to risk yourself again only strengthens my conviction that it is well deserved.”

So, after eating some cold meat and bread and cheese and washing it all down with diluted wine, Raoul ran back to the house of the baker and for the rest of the day stood watch outside – a small, inconspicuous, foreign-looking boy in dusty clothes. At last it grew dark. Then he saw that one window on the top floor was lighted by a solitary lamp. At irregular intervals a figure in the room walked back and forth across it.

Raoul was not as innocent a boy as his face might have led one to believe. His mother, after leaving France and settling in Spain, had taken up the world's oldest profession; her marriage to one of Philip's soldiers had done little to either legitimize her son or bring them money for more than the most basic necessities. By the time he was ten years old Raoul had become an accomplished night thief. By the time he was twelve he could plot his way into almost any building.

Thus it wasn't difficult for him to see that, under cover of darkness, it would be possible to scramble up a certain gate, climb to a shed roof, from there to swing onto a tree branch, climb to another branch, drop to the roof of a building, and then move across the tops of several houses to the one which Vogel had entered. It should also be possible to hang over the dormer and listen at the lighted window to any conversations which might take place within that upper-story room.

He was about to set forth on his climb when a carriage came rumbling down the street and drew up in front of the baker's house. The figure came to the dormer window and looked out and now Raoul could see it was, indeed, the black valet. Vogel quickly left the window and reappeared in the doorway below to welcome the visitor.

Quick as a weasel Raoul scrambled up to the lighted window and found himself peering into an unused room bare but for a bed in one corner and a small writing table. He discovered that he could hear without difficulty what the two men were saying. It soon became evident that Vogel's visitor was Count Reinhard.

“I hope you haven't found your little hide-away too boring,” the count was saying, “but you will be pleased to know Abbot Girardeux has not called for your death, or for your fingernails to be extracted one

by one, or your eyes put out, or your nose cut off. He is pleased that Torben Lerche has been sent where all heretics go at last.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

“He has also authorized my plan to take care of the meddlesome bishop, although he wished to hear none of the details – he said such knowledge would be incompatible with his calling. If we succeed in this, and recover for Girardeux the young count, it will be greatly in our favor when order is at last established in this part of the world. And, Sigismund, I might then even give you a few little girl serfs, all of your own, to play with!” And he let out a peal of laughter which struck Raoul as being very evil indeed.

They talked about other matters for a while, domestic arrangements for the count's secret stay in Reims, payment of Lepreaux and his men. Raoul's hands and legs and neck were beginning to ache with weariness and he was becoming worried that he would never hear more of Rudi's fate when suddenly the count interrupted what Vogel was saying with, “And the page? Girardeux was most displeased that you were unable to make him speak.”

“He was quite delirious.”

“I shall be angry if he doesn't survive the trip. I shall blame you for your care of him.”

“But we never touched him, my Lord. He just lay on that bed and mumbled and screamed sometimes and ran a fever so high you could have cooked an egg on his chest. And he kept calling for Torben Lerche, and you could see from what was rising in his middle...”

“I remember. You don't have to tell me.”

“At any rate, Ali's men have taken him, although they weren't pleased with his condition. That was five days ago. They were moving very quickly, as Muslims are wont to do in Christian lands.”

“Well, I hope he makes it to Oran. If not, I'll just have to find another youngster for him to sell. Mother of God, these Muslims have strange tastes!”

Raoul had heard enough. He backed up to the roof ridge. Now the moon had risen, and anyone curious enough, or in the proper position, could have seen the figure of a young boy silhouetted against the sky, running lithe as a cat from cornice to fore-peak, to dormer to chimney, until, with a little leap he swung onto a tree branch, making the silver leaves shimmer in the moonlight for a moment and then go still. And at last they would have seen a quiet boy in dusty clothes emerge onto the street and set off at first in a rapid stride and then at a full run toward the residence of the Bishop of Reims.

It was well past midnight when Raoul returned, but the bishop and his friends had not gone to sleep. They were still in Torben's room, Torben sitting up in his bed, the bishop and Franz drowsing in their chairs before a dying fire and Francois and Heinz stretched out on the floor on their stomachs before it. They all came to life as soon as Raoul breathed his news: “Rudi's alive! They will try to murder you, Your Excellency!”

He told his tale as quickly as he could, between gasps for breath and wiping his streaming forehead upon the sleeve of his shirt. When he had finished the bishop said with a smile of delighted intrigue, “Well, well, well, they want to follow up on what they think is their success, but we should be able to put a spoke in that wheel, don't you think?”

“Of course we can stop their murder,” Torben said. “But I won't count anything a success for us until I lay eyes on Rudi, alive and well, once again.”

“I think we should go to bed,” said Duke Franz, “but not before we express our gratitude to Raoul for his enormous achievement. Thanks to Raoul, we will all sleep better. Tomorrow we shall make our plans.”

On the way to their rooms, Heinz put an arm around Raoul's shoulders and said, "You are wonderful. I really admire you. And you like Rudi very much, don't you?"

Raoul nodded. "We never really talked with each other – you see, I had no French then to use because I had just arrived from Spain. We only took a walk together and....oh, Heinz, I am so glad he is alive!"

They had paused on a landing where the marble stairs turned back upon themselves and a huge tapestry of lions and saints draped the opposite wall. Raoul looked up into the intense blue eyes of the older boy.

"I would suppose," said Heinz, "that the two of you did more than just walk."

Raoul laughed, and bent his head toward Heinz's chest. "My master will be sleeping by Torben," Heinz continued. "I have his permission to stay with you if you wish. Are you in the mood for – what do you call it in your language, 'el amor?"

"You bet I am!" said Raoul suddenly, and with great relief, for the closeness of the attractive young German had suddenly sent his heart beating wildly and his sensuality soaring. "Oh, Heinz, I really need to be in someone's arms tonight!"

And so they stole into Raoul's room and with great delight stripped off their clothes, the page's uniform from Magdeburg and the dusty shirt and breeches of the young Spaniard, and dived into bed.

"I'm afraid I'm still raw from my adventures today," Raoul said. "I haven't bathed. I haven 't...."

"Who cares?" said Heinz, gathering the smaller boy into his arms. "It's the scent of honest sweat, the sweat of friendship. Now, tell me, truthfully, what do you like? What have you done? This is a night for Raoul."

The Slave Market

At first there were just the nightmares. Out of the smoke of his fever the soldiers would once again burst into the woodsman's cottage and he would be fighting for all he was worth against one, two, three swords, steadily losing ground. Then he would be at the duel in the glade at Magdeburg but this time Count Konrad was winning and it was Vogel who had his dagger and was plunging it into Torben's back.

Between the dreams there was dull misery, pain in his head, a terrible sickness, thirst.

And then there was motion. The dreams were interrupted by rocking and jolting, the sound of cracking whips and squeaking wheels and curses, some in a language he had never heard before. But all would dissolve into the pain and fever again, and the terrible dreams.

He had no idea how long he was sick, but when his mind finally cleared he found himself on a ship. It was some time in the middle of the night. He had never been at sea, and for almost an hour he lay quietly absorbing the new motion, the unfamiliar sounds and the smells of the ocean. Overhead the firmament glistened with a million stars – each, his old priest in Strasbourg had told him, the soul of an angel, although other people believed they were suns, smaller than our sun or much, much farther away. Looming up against the sky were dark masts and sails only slightly taut in the light night wind. At last he sat up. Two forms hunched over in quiet conversation by the railing looked around and one said to him in strangely accented French, “So, you're not going to die after all.”

“May I have something to drink?” Rudi asked.

The other man got up and fetched a goatskin of water and held it to his lips.

“Do you know where you are?” the first man said.

“No.” Rudi replied.

“One day out of Marseille, sailing for Oran.”

“Why?”

“Because that's where the slave market is.”

It took a moment for Rudi to realize the importance of this statement. “You mean I'm...? I've been *sold*?”

“Not sold yet. It will be nearly a week, in these winds, before we sight the Algerian coast.”

Without thinking, Rudi put his fingers to his throat; his necklace was still there, with its little medallion. Why it hadn't been removed from him he didn't understand. Perhaps his captors believed it a talisman too risky to tamper with.

It was morning before he was able to get a good look around him. He was lodged near the bow of the ship and scattered about the deck were other prisoners. Most were sturdy peasants, youths in their late teens, chosen, it seemed, as much for their evident lack of spirit as for their physical strength. A few, like himself, were younger and handsomer and they were segregated and kept under separate guard on the foredeck. While the young men were chained, inadequately clothed, under-fed and frequently beaten, Rudi's group were by comparison indulged.

For five days they made their slow way across the Mediterranean in the lightest of summer breezes. It was cool at night and the group on the foredeck were given blankets to wrap up in. During the day a

strong sun beat down on them; stripped to a garment not much larger than a loincloth, Rudi let its rays help heal him, darken his skin and bleach his hair. By the time they reached the docks at Oran it was a bitter, depressed, somewhat thinner, but healthier and strikingly handsome boy that stepped off the slave ship and walked with his companions, wrists bound behind his back, to the compound of Ali Ben Yusef.

In those days Oran was one of the most enterprising seaports of the Moorish realm. Proud and white, it was a focus of Islamic wealth and power, with a good harbor, a warm climate tempered by the ocean, and, rising behind the city, green hills covered with vineyards and olive groves. Sheep and goats grazed on the higher slopes. It was also an important center of the slave trade. Men came from all over North Africa to buy their human work animals auctioned off almost daily in the public square.

And it was there that Rudi was led the next morning in the company of other companions in misfortune belonging, temporarily, to Ali Ben Yussuf. There were young Berber girls, some not older than eleven or twelve, big husky Sudanese youths with bulging biceps and soft, childlike faces. All were depressed, for slavery for some meant relentless physical labor which would reduce them to cripples within a few years, for others a bordello where they would be worn out and replaced just as rapidly. The best looking of the girls and boys might be bought by rich men seeking fresh bodies on which to satisfy their personal tastes and pleasures; a very few of these might be rewarded, and ultimately reprieved, by a master's love.

Ali was probably the best-known slave trader in Oran, so when his little group appeared in the square a crowd immediately gathered. All of the boys and girls and youths had been readied for the block: they had been bathed, oiled, de-loused, re-clothed; teeth, hair, fingernails had been tended to, little sores treated and minimized. Now, before the auctioning began, they stood open to inspection. Those destined for the fields or in the quarries and mines were appraised by professional slave-handlers: fingers were poked in their mouths searching for loose or rotten teeth, hands felt their muscles, cool eyes inspected the callouses on the bottoms of their feet. The boys and girls endured the same inspection of their teeth but by wetlipped men who also touched and poked and

The Slave Market



caressed their breasts and genitals. Rudi shuddered as one fat man, who seemed to be greeted everywhere with respect and reverence, always followed by three fawning attendants, eyed him as if he were a piece of steak, then put out his hand and felt his buttocks. Rudi said a silent prayer that he would not become that man's slave.

Suddenly his attention was caught by a swarthy lad of about his own age who was staring at him from close to the balustrade. Their eyes met. The boy smiled and nodded, which Rudi realized was meant as some kind of a reassuring gesture.

But Rudi had little time to wonder about this, for Ali had already began the auction. First went the workers, and rather quickly. One by one they were bid and bought, and stepped down off the block to be led away by their new owners.

Then Rudi realized Ali was talking about him, praising his charms and advantages with terrific volubility. The bidding began. From Ali's excitement Rudi could see that he was going to fetch a handsome sum; his spirits sank, however, when he realized that the fat man who had fondled him was constantly topping everyone else's bids. Rudi searched the crowd in front of him, and when he finally spotted the face of the friendly boy there was no longer a smile upon it; in fact the boy looked as worried as Rudi felt himself.

Suddenly the bidding was over and Ali Ben Yussuf was saying to him in broken French, "You are lucky and I am lucky. You are now slave of Sultan Nasram Ben Mahmud and will live in great luxury – as long as you please him – and I have made more money selling you than I will from all the other prisoners together. What a wonderful way of repaying an old debt has your former master at Felsen!"

"No one at Felsen was ever my master!" Rudi exclaimed.

Quick as an eye-wink a whip lashed through the clear morning air and fell on Rudi's bare back, bringing swift tears of pain to the boy's eyes but no whimper to his lips. Ali hissed in his ear, "You will learn soon enough to quiet such talk, little slave. Now follow your master before you have to be dragged."

He was led away by the Sultan's attendants. They wound through narrow lanes and broad streets, through busy markets and plazas where beggars seemed more numerous than paving stones. His nose twitched to the smells of spices and burning wood and flowers and camel dung; they marched through crowds of whirling burnouses and veiled women; he listened to the sounds of the five-tone flute, the braying of donkeys. Suddenly everyone dropped to his knees and fell silent as a thin wavery voice from a tower near at hand called the Faithful to prayer. Rudi remained standing, but was quickly knocked prone.

He did, however, manage to raise his head and look about him: the whole square they had been crossing was transformed into a sea of rumps, all oriented in the same direction like a school of minnows in a pond. A moment later it was over and they continued on toward a grand palace occupying some high ground near the edge of the city.

And now Rudi gaped like a peasant in the presence of a king. They were admitted through a huge iron gate, and passed through enormous gardens and down vast halls. He had never seen anything like this in his life before. Magdeburg had been splendid and restrained – stone ramparts raising in the misty forests and glades of Germany; the palace of Bishop de Montferrat in the gently rolling country around Reims was elegant, but in Oran the palace of Sultan Nasram Ben Mahmud was simply overwhelming: it was at once grandiose and finely detailed, great blinding white walls of solid stone opposed by others of Andalusian polychrome ceramic which dazzled equally by their vibrant colors and fluid design. There were ivory panels carved with the delicacy of lace, archways of feminine grace, the curve of the arch above plunging inward at the bottom as though to caress the shoulders of the people passing through.

Everywhere there were tiles, and carpets of magnificent richness, and one seldom seemed to be out of earshot of a playing fountain or the song of birds kept captive in golden cages.

At last the little troop deposited Rudi in the baths and put him in the care of a gigantic man in a pink turban and little else, who settled him, naked and tingling, into steaming hot water, scrubbed him clean and then proceeded to lift him onto an ivory table and massage his back and his arms and his legs and his neck with sweet-smelling oils. Rudi tried to talk with him, first in French, then, losing heart, in German, but it seemed they had no words in common. When he attempted to get up the turbaned man just slapped him back down again, and after a moment or two Rudi began to feel that, like the sun, those kneading hands were helping to drive away the last weaknesses and cramps of his illness. They also produced a towering response in what he would soon learn to call his “zeb”: when he turned over the bath attendant saw it and winked and palmed over it some special creams, which did nothing to bring it down. But then, when he was finished, the man slapped it smartly with the side of his hand and, to Rudi's astonishment, it fell like a kite with its string cut.

Now he was dressed in a pair of richly decorated trousers, wide around the calves, a pair of red beaked shoes and a short white sleeveless jacket, and in that strange perfumed and costumed state he was led into the presence of Sultan Nasram Ben Mahmud himself.

Now that the sultan was home and had embedded himself like a fat, decorated slug on a couch overflowing with silk cushions, he seemed to Rudi even more loathsome. In perfect French he said, “I need not introduce myself. You know who I am and you are my slave. What I say is law. Disobedience results in immediate whipping, and should you persist in disobeying you will be executed slowly and painfully. Is that understood?”

Rudi nodded, swallowing a lump of fear in his throat.

“You answer 'Yes, my Lord'!” the sultan shouted. “Remember that in the future. Otherwise you will only answer when spoken to.”

Rudi blushed with anger and whispered, “Yes, my Lord.”

The sultan smiled. “You may sit at my feet. You may eat and drink till you are filled.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Before the couch was a table laid with the most delicious meal: fowl, cakes, wines, jellies. Rudi was hungry and he was so absorbed in eating that he hardly noticed the sultan's pudgy hands fondling his neck and hair, touching his ears, cupping the round muscles of his shoulders. However, at last his hunger was satisfied and he could eat no more, although, trying to delay the inevitable, he kept picking at an olive, a fig, just one more little cake.

“All right, you're not here as a calf for us to fatten,” the sultan said. “Stand up and let me have a closer look at you.”

Rudi rose and stood rather stiffly for the contemplation of his master. “Turn sideways... no the other way. That's right. Bow your head. Put a hand on your hip. Now off with your jacket.”

Rudi stripped the white garment from his shoulders, folded it carefully and placed it on the arm of the sofa.

“Remove your shoes. Now you can drop your pants.” Rudi blushed to the tips of his ears. He loosened the golden rope about his waist and the soft silk collapsed about his ankles, leaving him in his tanned, naked glory.

“Hands behind your neck,” the sultan continued.

“Turn around. Bend down and touch your toes. Kneel. Hug your knees. Jump up. Bend over again.”

Rudi could see that the protruding, arrogant eyes of the sultan liked what they saw, but he wondered which was worse, to incite his owner's lust or inspire his indifference.

“Come closer. Here, right by my leg.”

Rudi obeyed. He took up an almost military stand, shoulders thrown back, face expressionless, every muscle taught with humiliation.

And then the pudgy fingers came to his zeb, wrapped themselves around it and began to move across the sensitive skin.

“European boys really are different,” the sultan said. “I’ll never know why they wish to leave this on. But I see it doesn’t prevent what’s inside from working. Well, that’s not the part of you I am really interested in. Turn around.”

Nearly crimson with anger and embarrassment, Rudi obeyed, and endured the interminable tickle of those same hands as they moved slowly over the twin domes of his buttocks, then tucked themselves inside the perfumed cleft to probe for its little mouth.

“Bend over.”

Suddenly Rudi was picked up and thrown down in the cushions, and the sultan was upon him, a huge smothering mass, a soft slug with one hard drill which Rudi felt slipping about in the crack of his buttocks searching for the right place to tap. At last it found the port, and then, with one greased lunge, it was in him.

Rudi tore at the cushions with his hands, sobbed into them with pain and humiliation. He hated his body. In every way it betrayed him: in opening up to the sultan, in his own zeb, clasped in the cushions, stiffening and responding and at last pouring forth his young seed like blood from a wound. A moment later the tap in him swelled, probed even farther home, and then the obese body shuddered and was still but for the pant of a fat man into his crimson ear. At last the sultan groaned and rolled off and Rudi was able to rise from that hated couch. As Rudi was led away by the eunuchs the sultan was busy ordering new refreshments.

They let him bathe again and dress, then showed him to a reasonably comfortable room with a narrow bed, and there the storm of weeping he had felt gathering ever since he had come to his senses on the slave boat, held back as he had been sold on the block and molested by the sultan, burst forth. He wept for all the kind friends he had known and now would never see again: Duke Franz and Heinz and Bruno, Bishop de Montferrat, Raoul, Francois. Would they miss him? Would they think about him sometimes? And Torben: dead, if not from Vogel’s treacherous stab, then certainly in the fire. Was it worth going on? Could he fashion some kind of a hangman’s noose out of the clothes they had given him, end his life on these far shores and maybe reach the arms of Torben again in heaven?

After the weeping wore itself out he lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling. He dreaded the long, boring hours he was going to spend in this captivity, monotony punctuated only by an occasional humiliating rape whenever the fat sultan could tear himself away from eating.

Suddenly he heard a faint clatter outside. He got up and threw open his window. It was evening, now, the great cloudless heavens pale blue over the sea to the west but dark enough for the bravest stars to be out where the sky vaulted over the hills south and east of Oran. Somehow the sight of open sky picked up his drooping spirits. Looking down, he saw an arrow lying on the stone floor of the balcony. Rudi picked it up, examined it curiously, and then he heard a whistle. In the garden court below the boy from the slave market was waving at him, and now he bent a small bow and sent a second arrow onto the balcony, this time trailing a fine silken thread. The boy made motions for him to pull on the thread, which soon brought up a string, and this, in turn, a knotted rope. He wound the rope around the balcony railing and climbed down.

As soon as his feet touched the grass below a voice whispered in his ear, in stumbling but comprehensible French, “Not a single sound, or we’ll both be dead.”

A firm hand caught his and led him swiftly through the gardens, along silent walkways between the buildings until they reached a flight of stone steps which took them up to a deserted soldiers' post on the palace walls. They made their way down a rope ladder the boy had evidently hung there earlier in the evening, and suddenly they were in the busy streets of Oran, fleeing through the crowds.

The boy turned into a house and, motioning Rudi to stay by the door, returned a moment later with a long strip of cloth.

"Stay still," the boy said. With deft hands he began winding the cloth around Rudi's head. It was the first chance Rudi had of looking closely at his companion: a strong boy, undeniably handsome, intelligent eyes, vital face full of confidence. Rudi liked him immediately. When the boy realized Rudi was studying him he glanced down and smiled, revealing a generous mouth with two rows of fine, even teeth. "Now you look one of us," the boy said. "Come on!"

Two boys with Algerian turbans emerged into the thinning city crowds. They could walk swiftly, now, without raising suspicions. At last they broke out into the country and in a small olive grove they paused to catch their breath.

"Oh, here," said the boy, and he handed to Rudi his own dagger, the one given him by Torben what seemed like a lifetime ago.

"How do you come to have *this*?" Rudi stammered. "I stole it from Ali Ben Yussuf," his companion said with a joyous grin. "It seems it was to have gone with the purchase. It's yours, isn't it?"

"Yes... oh, yes! But, there are so many questions, I don't know where to begin. My name is Rudi. What is yours, and why do you endanger your own life to save me from the sultan?"

"I'm called Djuna," the boy replied. "For the rest, you'll get an explanation, of course, but later, and from my master. Now we must hurry again, for your escape may already have been noticed."

In a small enclosure in the hills a pair of fresh horses was waiting for them. These they mounted and set off southwards at a brisk trot.

It was a dark night. They had only starlight and the sharp eyes of the horses to guide them. Up and up into the mountains they rode, not by the main thoroughfares but by trails which wound between crags, through dry watercourses. At last they came to a narrow gorge and Djuna reined in his horse, put his hands to his mouth and gave a call which sounded to Rudi like a cross between a Bavarian yodel and the lowing of a very young cow. They listened, but all Rudi could hear was the whimpering of the night wind through the spiky bushes close to their heads. But Djuna must have heard some reply, for they set forth again, this time at a more stately pace.

"At last," Djuna said, we're safe. We're guarded by my master's men."

The gorge opened out into a level valley. They were on a road, now, and on either side of them there was the sound of irrigation water and the scent of flowers. Soon a yellow half-moon rose in the sky to the right of them. When they rounded a bend in the road it lit, between rows of cypress, an enormous fortified castle. A few minutes later Djuna again gave his call and the castle gates opened majestically and let them ride their weary horses into the castle court.

The two boys dismounted and stretched their legs with great pleasure. Then Djuna turned to Rudi and said formally, but with a twinkle in his eye, "Welcome to Sar-el-Sidh. Please come and meet my master, the Sheik Mabruk. He, too, wears the sign of the dagger." And he pointed to Rudi's necklace with its small, gleaming dagger cross.

Chapter 13

The Revengers

An alert observer sitting in the pub across from the entrance to the palace of Julien de Montferrat, Bishop of Reims, would have noticed a curious sequence of events one morning shortly after Raoul's evening of espionage and night of ecstasy with Heinz. First he would have seen the palace gates open and the bishop ride forth in his carriage accompanied only by a dark, Spanish-appearing lad and a blond, aristocratic French boy, all chatting away amiably and looking for all the world as though they were only out to enjoy the nice weather and a bit of nature and perhaps visit one or two of the local monasteries.

As soon as the carriage and its team of four horses had moved out of sight down the Paris road, three men in the inn, two soldiers and an austere civilian dressed in black, got up from the table beside the window where they had been sitting almost since sun-up, went out into the courtyard, mounted three horses that were readied and tethered there, and set off after the bishop's carriage at a discreet distance.

And no sooner were these three riders out of sight than another three emerged from the palace gates, an aristocrat in his middle thirties dressed simply but finely in dark green and blue, a young man of military bearing in his early twenties and a strikingly handsome blond page boy wearing both his master's crest and his sixteen years with great dignity and confidence.

In the carriage the atmosphere was tense but optimistic. "I saw them in the pub," Raoul was saying, "Count Reinhard, Vogel and the soldier I didn't know."

"So they got our message," said Francois.

"Evidently." The bishop nodded. "It shouldn't be long, now. There's a stretch of woods after the next farm. I think that's where it will probably happen. Well, it's a fine day to meet your maker – for them and perhaps even us!"

All three crossed themselves and watched, a bit drymouthed, as the woods approached.

The attack came where they had expected it, and with brutal suddenness. One moment they were passing through a peaceful forest remarkable only in that they couldn't hear a single bird singing; the next moment every tree seemed to have hatched an enemy, and their attackers were joined quickly from behind by Duke Reinhard, Lepreaux and Vogel. The two boys drew their gleaming rapiers out of the bottom of the carriage, jumped down and engaged the soldiers, who cursed to find their victims prepared and willing to fight. They were even more surprised when Duke Franz, Torben and Heinz thundered up on their horses and started cutting down the ambushers from behind with cruel efficiency.

It all happened very quickly, and in a great turmoil of dust and cries, of rearing horses and plunging swords. As Lepreaux's men fell one by one, Vogel, seeing the advantage shift, made his way unobtrusively toward the carriage, climbed upon it from behind, stabbed the driver in the back and swung inside to attack the bishop. Then the team panicked and the coach went careening off down the road.

It is remarkable how rapidly a huge animal like a horse can transform itself from tranquility to total motion, but a fifteen-year-old boy can be even quicker. Out of the corner of his eye Francois had seen the coachman fall to the ground with blood gushing from his mouth. Instantly he disengaged himself from the battle and, with a loud cry of horror, dropped his sword, leapt upon the nearest horse and rushed off after the runaway carriage.

Julien de Montferrat was not entirely incapacitated with age: there was still strength in his arms, and now he was fighting for his life. Francois could see, as he drew level with the coach, that the old bishop, helped by the violent and unpredictable swaying of the runaway carriage, was so far successfully

defending himself. The boy leapt onto the carriage and began clawing his way toward his beloved guardian.

Behind, where the road entered the woods, the battle was almost over: only Count Reinhard and Lepreaux were still fighting. "Leave them to Torben and me," Duke Franz shouted to Raoul and Heinz. "After the carriage – quick!"

Duke Franz caught Torben's eye. The old excitement was back, the wink of conspiracy, the trust, the deep love born in greener years, the wonderful satisfaction of facing danger together. They closed in on their enemies, who were now in disarray and sensing defeat. Back and back they drove Reinhard and Lepreaux, farther from the road, into deeper and wetter woods. Now they were on soggy ground, with sickly skunk cabbages rising round their ankles and stinking where they broke them. Lepreaux stumbled on a rotten log. Duke Franz waited patiently while the frightened soldier picked himself up. Then Lepreaux made an uncontrolled lunge and impaled himself on Franz's rapier.

So now Reinhard was fighting alone. How had this happened, he asked himself desperately. Where was Vogel? Confound the man! Was he a traitor as well as an assassin? And Lepreaux's ten soldiers: how had they *all* been killed by these two swordsmen and their impudent pages? He looked about him for the support he had always had, but all he saw was the deepening, festering swamp, and before him the controlled attack and implacable visage of Torben Lerche. He began to lose control. Mud sucked at his feet, keeping him constantly just a little off balance. He began to shake, And then his rapier went flying out of his hand and splashed in a putrefying puddle.

"Very well," said Torben. "This one's for Rudi!" With a quick lunge he penetrated Reinhard's throat, and the last count of Felsen sank into the swamp in a gurgle of spurting blood.

When Francois came inside the coach at last Vogel had his dagger raised above his head ready to make the killing stab into the heart of Bishop de Montferrat. All the boy had to attack with were the weapons he had come into the world with. Vogel felt teeth sink into his shoulder and fingers tear at the flesh of his face. He swung around, furious, trying to shake off the biting, scratching, howling boy.

By now Heinz and Raoul had drawn up to the runaway coach, but its motion had become so violent they couldn't bring their horses near enough to jump aboard. Raoul went forward to try to take the reins of one of the lead horses. Heinz watched the struggle between Francois and Vogel, the boy holding the black valet's wrist with a grip of desperation, the bishop beating at Vogel's head with the riding crop. It seemed that Vogel would shortly have to give up his attack when a violent lurch made Francois let go of the valet's wrist. Quick as a snake Vogel drove his knife into the boy's chest, then turned back to deal the bishop the same death blow. But the coach had now torn loose from its team, went hurtling off the road and turned ever.

Vogel was thrown clear. He landed, cat-like, on his feet.

Before Heinz and Raoul could deal with him he leapt on one of their horses and rode off down the road as fast as he could in the direction of Paris.

Heinz and Raoul rushed to help the bishop and Francois out of the upturned carriage. The bishop was a bit bruised but otherwise unharmed. Francois lay in a crumpled heap, his face as pale as the blood gushing from his chest was red. Old Julien de Montferrat knelt at the side of his youthful charge and, while Heinz tried to stop the flow of blood, took the cooling hands in his own and whispered deeply felt words of thanks. Torben and Franz arrived on their horses, dismounted and crept close.

For a moment Francois revived. He had been in a deep dream. He was back in Châlons; it was a summer night with heat-lightning in a dance all around the sky. He was waiting for Bernhard, impatient,

wondering why his friend was taking so long to visit him. Then across the flickering at the windows he saw the form of his lover coming toward him, bending over him, touching him, and that was the moment he became conscious again and aware of the worried faces of his friends.

Francois licked his dry lips and said, "Promise you'll find Rudi."

"We will," said Torben solemnly. "I swear to you my soul will never find peace until Rudi sleeps once more at my side."

Francois closed his eyes. "I'm so tired," he said, his voice growing weaker, "but soon I will see Bernhard again."

Heinz caught Torben's eye and shook his head: there was no way the steady flow of blood could be stopped. Julien de Montferrat began to speak the last rites. They watched as the boy's breath became shallower. At last they saw Francois smile as if in the midst of a happy dream and then a gentle sigh told them that death had fetched their friend.

The private place of worship of the bishop of Reims was by no means the center of the palace complex, for Julien de Montferrat was more concerned with politics and a variety of intellectual pursuits than in prayer, but no grand cathedral could have been a better setting for the burial of a friend than this small Florentine palace chapel where the bishop, Torben, Franz and the two boys knelt the next morning to pay their last respects to the young Count Francois of Châlons-sur-Mame. The free-floating voices of the boys' choir hidden in the recesses behind the sanctuary filled the chapel with the sounds of the ancient requiem, the tranquility of the dream of a life everlasting.

Francois himself had been dressed in a pair of exquisite black pants and a white silk shirt. His face still carried the smile which had come upon it at the moment of death.

Duke Franz was the last to speak over Francois before the lid of the coffin was closed. "Farewell, brave lad," he said. "May you be happy wherever you arrive." And then he drew from his cloak a golden necklace with the dagger medallion and placed it on the folded hands of the boy, and, thus admitted to the League of the Dagger, Francois was carried into the crypt where the members of the Châlons-sur-Marne family rested.

"Don't let us immerse ourselves in sad memories," the bishop told his friends a little later when they assembled in his private chambers. "Francois died as we all wish to die. Let us remember him alive, a happy and bonny lad, loved by all of us."

"His death directs us toward the living, and our promises," said Duke Franz. "And it is fitting that not just Francois should be admitted to the League of the Dagger today, but someone else who earned it well in the last troubled days and deserves it richly." His eyes sought those of Raoul. "Come here, lad; kneel before me."

Raoul dropped to his knees and with big eyes full of wonder and perhaps even a tear or two allowed the golden chain to be hung about his neck and the golden dagger cross to lie against his chest.

"Receive this medallion," Duke Franz continued. "It admits you to our League, with all the status of the other Knights of the Dagger."

Raoul rose and fell into the fond embraces of his friends. He touched the dagger cross with his fingers, looked down at its golden brilliance. "Rudi has it too, doesn't he?" Raoul asked Torben.

"Yes. Aside from the five people present here, as far as I remember there are only twelve other Knights of the Dagger scattered over the world, but there might be more since I last saw a count. Duke Franz and two others have the authority to award the cross: one in England, one in North Africa – which means one Catholic, one Protestant and one Muslim."

They discussed the history of the League for some minutes, re-living their own adventures and telling of those of the others. At last the bishop interrupted and said, "In a few moments refreshments will be served with something to eat, and then we must busy ourselves with the search for Rudi."

"Tomorrow I leave," said Torben.

"And I, of course, too," said Duke Franz.

"And you can't go without your page," said Heinz, his color heightening with a glint of excitement in his eyes.

Only Raoul looked sad, as though, after being admitted into the League of the Dagger, he was once again being treated as a child.

The bishop nodded. "Do find Rudi, and return to Reims. It may be that the boy is more important than even you suspect, my dear Torben." Then he turned to Raoul and said, "If you wish to go with them you may, my boy. I'll not be the one to demand that a Knight of the Dagger stay safely at home when his friends need a helping hand."

Raoul fell to his knees once again, this time before his guardian to stammer his thanks.

The bishop bestowed a fatherly kiss upon the curly head and added, with a twinkle, "I'm sure Torben won't mind having someone on the trip to fill Rudi's place – as a page, of course...."

The Castle in the Mountains

Sar-el-Sidh, walled and turreted and built of dense gray sandstone quarried from the nearby cliffs, was less castle than fortress. Even inside Rudi found none of the opulence of the palace of the Sultan of Oran. The furnishings were in spare good taste: an occasional tapestry draping one of the massive walls, an elegant medieval chest here, an exquisite carved ivory screen partitioning off some antechamber. The bath, however, was beautifully tiled in lavender and gold and steam lightly scented with jasmine curled over the ample waters where Rudi now found himself sitting across from Djuna on a submerged seat, soaking away the tiredness and flushing off the dust of their journey.

“Your skin is so *white!*” Djuna exclaimed in his awkward French. There was a great deal more than impartial curiosity in his eyes. “But your zeb is like the zeb of a little boy.”

“What?” said Rudi. “It doesn't seem smaller than yours.”

“Oh, *pardon!* I don't mean it is little. But it hasn't been, how do you say, purified.”

Rudi laughed. “How do you purify a zeb?”

Djuna slid around the tiled seat until he was sitting next to Rudi. “Look. Yours still has its little house for the tip to slide back into. Mine doesn't.”

“They cut it off?” Djuna nodded. “Did it hurt?”

“Of course.”

“Does it have as much feeling? I mean, as if they hadn't done that to you?”

“As much?” Djuna thought for a moment with the beginnings of a smile on his lips. “I cannot tell you. All I know is it has so much feeling it makes me do all kinds of crazy things. And it really says *merci* to me when I shake hands with it, especially with this little piece of soap....”

Boys had fun the same way everywhere, Rudi decided, and their playthings gave them the same nice feelings even when they had been trimmed off a bit. He couldn't help embracing Djuna and giving him a solid kiss of gratitude on his mouth. “That's for rescuing me,” Rudi said. “And because we're friends.”

The closeness of their bodies, the kiss, the soapy caresses were having the sweetest effect on Djuna's zeb. He looked into Rudi's eyes with mischief and invitation.

But Rudi shook his head. “I don't think I'm up to that yet. The fat sultan's already had me this afternoon. It wasn't fun, but he did get it out of me, if you know what I mean.”

“*Tant pis.* Well, I'll manage on my own. If *you* don't mind, of course.”



Rudi shook his head, then slid to another side of the bath so the young Arab boy would have all the room he needed. Djuna half sank into the water and straightened his body until his neck was resting on the rounded golden rim. He soaped his hand and applied it to his zeb, beginning the motion slowly and luxuriantly, half closing his eyes and sighing gently from time to time. Rudi watched as waves of tension and satisfaction passed through the taught body, from shoulders to chest and abdomen, down through thighs and calves and ending with toes stretched and clenched under the surface of the water.

Djuna varied his caresses, from rapid to languorous, building, postponing, building again and withholding. To his surprise, Rudi found he was responding – and the half-opened eyes of Djuna noticed: the tentative smile on his lips broadened until the two boys were exchanging a look of frank complicity.

“Well, I *thought* he'd taken it all out of me,” Rudi confessed.

With a whoop of pleasure and a big splash Djuna closed in on Rudi. Soon they were tangling their limbs and uniting their lips on the edge of the pool, Rudi on top of Djuna, gliding in a simple soap-slippery embrace which Rudi found was rapidly washing away the rancid memory of the Sultan's rape.

“Are you going to do the real thing to me?” Djuna whispered at length.

“I would love to. Here, give me the soap.”

And now, with the greatest pleasure, Rudi urged Djuna over onto his stomach, watched as the Arab boy turned up his small, strong, rounded buttocks and spread his firm thighs. Then, streaming suds, Rudi locked himself against Djuna's back and drove his love-staff home in what seemed like one long, tight but yielding journey.

“Hurt?” Rudi whispered into the golden-tan ear beneath his lips.

“Does it matter?”

“Well....”

“Take me as fast and deep as you want. Next time it's my turn!”

Sheik Mabruk el Sidh was a tall, muscular man in his late twenties. Black eyes flashed with intelligence and wit below heavy brows and above a nobly arched nose.

“Welcome, young knight of the dagger,” he said to Rudi in excellent French as, an hour later, the two boys took their places for dinner in the dining hall. “Welcome to Sar-el-Sidh. Djuna, you are to be commended for spotting the golden medallion in that crowd of slaves – although it is no wonder that your eyes were drawn to such a handsome lad whose hair is the color of the young sun.

I, too, wear the dagger, so, my honored guest, you are among friends. Now, tell me your name and how you came to be a member of our select society.”

Rudi told his long story, finishing with tears in his eyes.

“So now I no longer have a master,” Rudi said, “for I have lost my beloved and, until Djuna rescued me, all I wanted to do was die and go to heaven to be with Torben again.”

“No,” the sheik said. “You are young. You must live your life. Paradise can wait. Now let me tell you my part in The League of the Dagger. It was created, as you undoubtedly know, some years ago in Spain by my good friends Duke Franz of Magdeburg-Saale and an Englishman whom you obviously haven't met by the name of Walter Leighmore – and Sheik Mabruk!”

The sheik smiled at Rudi's reaction of pleasant surprise.

He had known that a Muslim had been the third founder of the League but not that it had been Sheik Mabruk. “These three very different people in background and religion were imprisoned together for some length of time, and then we learned how much more important the individual worth of a man was than the racial and cultural conditions which determined the superficial aspects of his life. We also discovered that the three of us had one underlying similarity which set us off from many other worthy

men.”

“Duke Franz and Torben,” Rudi mused.

“And, now, Torben and you. We created the League, and decided that only the three of us would have the power to bestow the dagger-cross of membership and reward. So it shall be my pleasure – and, I suspect, Djuna's pleasure, too,” the sheik added with a twinkle in his eye, “to be your host as long as you care to make your home with us. And, in any case, we must wait a while before you return to Europe and your friends, for Sultan Nasram controls the coastline hereabouts and it wouldn't be safe to try to put you on a ship as long as he might be searching for you.”

Rudi did wait, and bide his time. It wasn't long before he had explored all of the castle and the valley in which it rested. He soon came to feel quite at home, and with the quiet, pleasant mountaineers who were the sheik's devoted subjects. One particular friend was the blacksmith, an enormous man with only one leg and seemingly without a single shirt, for whenever Rudi saw him he was working bare-chested at the forge or pounding on his anvil dripping in pungent sweat. Soon Rudi, too, was stripping himself to his breeches and fashioning horse-shoes, shackles, hinges and metal straps for the boxes carried by the great camels of the sheik. From the blacksmith Rudi began to learn Arabic; from cranking the forge and making the heavy hammer ring on glowing iron he began to feel his muscles regain the strength and tone they had lost during his long illness.

And then, too, Rudi and Djuna walked and climbed, sometimes for several days, into the mountains and to the very edge of the vast sea of sand to the south.

“Nobody knows how far the desert goes,” Djuna told him when, about sunset time one day, they first caught sight of it, low hills and dunes flowing endlessly into the purple distance. “It has never been crossed. They say there are little black men who eat children out there and they worship gods carved of people's bones and they drink a liquor which makes the men so drunk they only sleep with boys and beat away their women. At any rate, we don't have to worry about an attack from our neighbors from this side of the sheikdom.”

They camped that night in a little notch on a mountainside where a trickle of fresh water issued from a sweet spring and gathered in a rock-bound pond before spilling away into the desert below. After dark they rolled together in their single blanket and lay staring at the heavens. Never in his life had Rudi seen the stars so bright.

“I used to do this with Torben sometimes,” Rudi said softly.

“You miss him a lot?”

“Every minute.”

“Even when you're joking and we're fooling around?”

“Yes, even then.” And suddenly Rudi was overcome with a storm of tears. He clutched Djuna to him and wept into his friend's warm, sweat-scented neck. Calmly Djuna held him until the crying had run its course and then he took Rudi's face in his hands and began to lick away his tears and the streaks they had made on his face. Soon both boys were passionate, and in the thrust and entry of love, both given and received, Rudi found a kind of magic echo, a mystical remembering of what he had had so long ago, and so far north of where he lay, with Torben.

It wasn't only with Djuna that Rudi went into the mountains. Taking advantage of a Muslim festival, Sheik Mabruk arranged a hunting trip and one morning a party of some dozen horsemen set out from the castle just as the first orange sunlight was beginning to strike the tops of the mountains. Any spy watching the expedition would have assumed Rudi, turbaned and now deeply tanned by the sun, was just another handsome Arab boy, unless he might have caught a flash of blue from eyes that could only have been bred

in the north.

One afternoon they camped by a small watercourse, and while the men were preparing for the night, gathering firewood and unpacking the camp kitchen, Rudi noticed that Sheik Mabruk drew Djuna aside and whispered a few words to him. Djuna nodded and stared at his feet. Rudi had always suspected that the two of them had the same kind of relationship as he had with Torben, although Djuna had never spoken of it; he was even more convinced when the sheik approached him and said, "You will have to excuse us, Rudi, for an hour or so, for I must take care of Djuna's education. His impulsiveness on two occasions today scared away the deer. We will be back for supper and I expect you will be able to entertain yourself in the meantime."

Rudi nodded politely and avoided Djuna's eyes.

He knew it wasn't nice to spy on other people's private lives: if they wished to tell little lies to gain privacy their friends should allow them to do so. But Rudi's curiosity had the better of him, and as soon as the sheik and Djuna were out of sight he jumped up and started to follow.

For ten minutes he dodged after them, moving stealthily from bush to rock to hollow in the ground, until at last he stopped dead in his tracks, unable to see them any more. Then he noticed that in a jumble of gigantic granite boulders there was a network of caves and most likely it was into these that the man and the boy had disappeared.

Rudi crept toward the rocks and began crawling up through the labyrinthine openings. At last he heard the sound of quiet voices. He lay on a flat rock surface and wriggled toward where he could look down into a large cave. There was the sheik and, standing before him, a subdued-looking Djuna. The sheik gave some kind of an order; the boy looked up, slowly unfastened the belt around his heavily pleated trousers, let them glide down about his ankles, stepped out of them and let the short sleeveless jacket follow. Now he stood in bronzed nudity, head bowed, arms crossed, and submitted, without show of pain, to several sharp lashes from the sheik's riding whip. When the punishment was over Djuna let his arms fall to his sides and raised his head to look questioningly at his master.

Sheik Mabruk lifted Djuna's face with his hands and spoke a few words. Immediately the boy's face brightened with a smile; he locked his hands behind the sheik's neck and, pulling himself up, found his master's lips.

Now the boy was stripping the man. Off came the jacket, down came the trousers. The great sword was unbuckled and laid carefully aside on a rock. And then the two tanned bodies united and dropped to the sandy floor of the cave, the one beautiful in rugged muscled strength, the other golden, supple, smooth in its youthful velour.

The ultimate coupling of man and boy brought back to Rudi a wave of memory, of nights in inns, in palaces, in Torben's room at Magdeburg. His own passion rose with the mounting ecstasy of the couple he spied on below. And almost as their passion broke, deep within the boy and voiding upon the cave sand, Rudi's feelings, too, erupted, and he only just managed to arrange his clothing so that it wouldn't intercept the trajectory of his boyhood seed. Then, ashamed of himself but with his curiosity satisfied, he crept back out of the cave and set off for the hunting camp.

It was now nearly dark. In the distance he could see the yellow flames of the camp fire blazing away under the dark blue African sky. Suddenly he stopped. Two figures, who obviously didn't belong to the hunting party, were outlined against the blaze. So there *were* spies about. The camp was being watched! Rudi made a great circle and came into the camp from the opposite direction, just as Sheik Mabruk and Djuna arrived: he wasted no time telling them of his discovery.

Orders went out. Soon the scouts brought in one prisoner – the other man had escaped. This one was screaming rude and insulting threats and demanded to be set free at once.

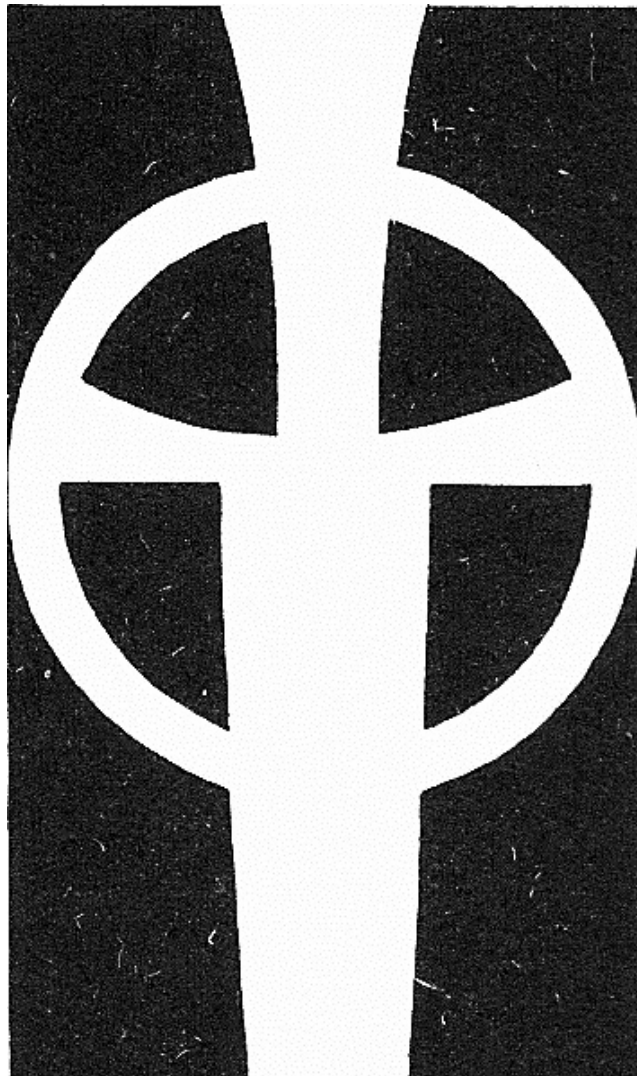
“Otherwise you will know the wrath of the sultan,” the captive cried. “And you had better return that run-away slave to him.” The prisoner pointed to Rudi. “As soon as my friend reaches Oran and Sultan Nasram is informed that the bed-boy he purchased is under protection here, well I would not like to be Sheik Mabruk in Sar-el-Sidh...”

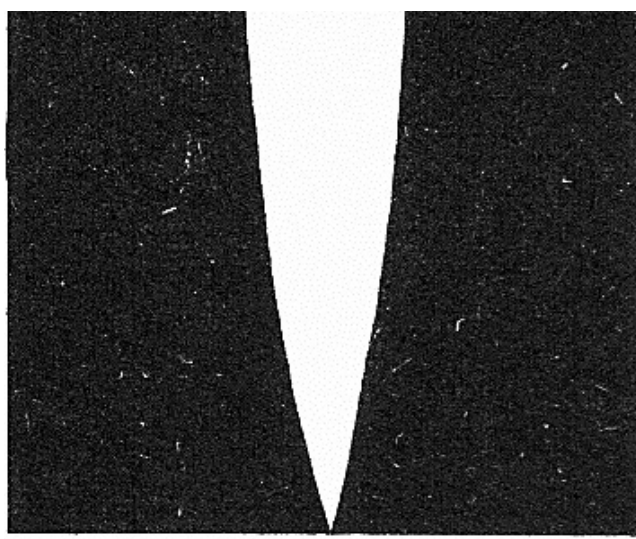
The sheik stroked his chin and turned to Rudi. “It seems the secret is out – and we shall soon receive a visit from the sultan. He will look upon this opportunity as a gift from Allah, the perfect excuse to attack me. Because, you see, he has always coveted my sheikdom – and this is the second time this very thing has happened: Djuna, too, was destined for the silk couches of Sultan Nasram, but I won him in combat even before he reached Oran.”

“Then you'd better return him!” the captive shouted. The sheik turned to his prisoner. “You have told us with some eloquence that a message about our young guest's presence here is on its way to the sultan. I thus can see no reason to send you off on the same errand. And since in addition you would seem to lack the most fundamental rudiments of courtesy I think it appropriate to let you take leave of your life at once.”

It was as though the man had been struck by lightning; his confidence vaporized like a puddle in the heat of the sun. Now there was no end to his prayers and promises, but the sheik had made up his mind. Two of his men dragged the captive away screaming and shouting and, with quick efficiency, separated his head from its body.

Sheik Mabruk then ordered them to break camp, and through the silence of the dark night they hurried back to Sar-el-Sidh.





RS

The Long Ride

If Duke Franz and Torben Lerche had ever harbored doubts about Bishop Julien de Montferrat's political power or the efficiency of his network of connections throughout Europe, they were quickly dispelled during the first week of their long journey to the south. The bishop had given Franz a signet ring with detailed instructions as to where he could show it: at certain courts, inns, abbeys, to some trusted farmers, tradesmen or soldiers. There was always lodging for them at the end of the day, sometimes sumptuous, sometimes merely modest but clean. They were furnished with supplies and, from time to time, fresh horses.

Rather than follow the usual Saone-Rhone trade route to the Mediterranean, they rode southeast to Bourges and then down through the Auvergne and Languedoc. They wound around troubled areas, snaking between the armies of the Catholic Right and the Huguenot guerillas, avoiding unfriendly dukedoms and areas infested with highway robbers. They pushed on so hard that the lovely countryside they passed through scarcely made any impression on them, but the trip itself, with its hardships and occasional funny incidents, welded the four travelers into a smoothly working unit: when Torben was suddenly overwhelmed with worry and sadness, when one of the boys seemed so weary he felt he just couldn't ride any more that day, the others came to his assistance and cheered him up with songs and banter, or sometimes just a quiet hand on his arm.

They spent one tumultuous night in a school for novice ecclesiastical clerks deep in the broad-leaf forests of the western flank of the Masif Central. Here a covey of rather silly monks had long ago given up trying to stem the natural exuberance of three dozen intelligent boys in the full flux of puberty. The lads undoubtedly learned a bit of Latin and writing during the day, but, of their bodies and how to extract from them the most exquisite and social pleasures during the long, lazy and unsupervised nights, they certainly came to know a great deal better.

The morning after their visit, back on the road once again, Duke Franz said to Torben, "I think Heinz and Raoul look a bit weary, don't you?"

Indeed, they did. Heinz especially seemed to be asleep on his mount.

"Were the beds too hard or something?" Torben asked Raoul innocently.

"What?" the boy blinked in bleary-eyed confusion.

"You didn't let those novice clerks keep you awake all night, did you?"

A slow smile spread over Raoul's dark face. "Yes, I'm afraid I did. I didn't have much choice. But there were only three of them in my bed. You see, they're quite used to people of my coloring this close to the Mediterranean, but Heinz with his fine blond hair and blue eyes was set upon by all the rest – and as far as I could tell, all of them at once."

"It was a night to remember," Heinz admitted, "but after a while enough was enough. And when I told them at last I wanted to go to sleep they said they didn't understand my poor French – besides, they kept kissing me and putting other things in my mouth. How can you fight against thirty young boys who just want to love you and make you feel nice? In the end I gave up and lay there like a good guest and let it all happen. I'd drop off to sleep and then wake up with some new warm little clerklet wrapped around my

body and panting in my ear, and satisfying himself in one fashion or another – his turn, I suppose, according to the order of priority they'd set up. I really hope, Franz, you don't want me to crawl into your blankets tonight!”

Duke Franz chuckled and shook his head. “You were so busy with your dormitory friends that you didn't notice what was going on in the prelate's guest wing. I had a little friend, just one and very nice, by my side all night, but I didn't permit him to make an undue nuisance of himself. And Torben, befitting his younger years, had two, if I'm not mistaken...”

“Thank heavens!” said Raoul.

“So tonight will be a night of rest,” the duke proclaimed.

They crossed the Pyrenees in a violent storm. Although the mountains are scarcely fifty miles wide, it took them five days, pushing their frightened horses against rain and wind, with lightning striking the ridges and the mountain tops and thunder rolling like the boom of great drums from craggy peak to rock wall and back again.

Nights they huddled in small rock shelters with the few other travelers whose missions were so urgent that they couldn't wait for better weather. As the oldest of their group, Duke Franz was the weariest at the end of each day. Torben was touched to see how cheerfully and unobtrusively Heinz took care of him then, helping him out of his drenched clothes and into a dry shirt and trousers, bringing him the hot food the two boys had labored to cook and, when darkness finally fell, holding his master close in sleep and seeing he was always covered with the blanket they shared so he wouldn't catch a chill. The next morning Duke Franz was usually the first up, all his vigor restored and anxious to press on.

At last they rode out from the storm into clear skies on the southern side of the mountains, but before they emerged onto the lowlands of Zarazoga they had to make one difficult ford of a storm-swollen river. The horses of Duke Franz and Torben picked their way through the torrent successfully, but Raoul's mount stumbled and the young Spaniard found himself swept out of the saddle by the current and carried downstream in a most undignified tumble of arms and legs. As a precaution, the two boys had joined themselves with a length of rope, and this now pulled Heinz into the water, too. But the older boy was a strong swimmer; he made the far bank without difficulty and then, to the cheering and laughter of their masters, pulled Raoul in like an angler landing an enormous fish.

It was early evening, but the air was at last mild and dry. They decided to camp where they were rather than seek an inn. The two boys built a big fire on the banks of the stream, stripped off their soaking cloths and hung them on sticks before it to dry. Then they set about preparing the evening meal: a smoked ham bought that same afternoon from a hill farm along the way, bread and early-ripening apples from the south slopes of the mountains they had just crossed.

Torben and the duke watched the play of firelight on the boys' wiry, sun-tanned bodies as they tidied up camp for the night. It had been some days since they had had the luxury of being intimate with their charges, and now Duke Franz called Heinz to him and stood gazing at the handsome young man whose confession of need was lengthening and hardening before his eyes.

“I've neglected you, haven't I?” the duke said.

Heinz looked down and moved a pebble with his bare toe. “That's all right. You had to.”

“I'll make it up to you tonight.”

Heinz raised his eyes and smiled broadly. “Good,” he said.

“You'll forgive us, Torben, if we retire? Well, of course you will, for I see Raoul is no less in need than Heinz.”

Laughing, the two naked boys jumped to their masters and led them to where they had spread their

blankets for the night. By now the fire had burned to a pile of dim red coals. Men and boys sank to their knees and, quickly casting aside their remaining garments, sought the tenderness and gentleness and sweetness of love they had missed for so many days.

An elderly owl, sleeping late in a nearby tree, awoke with a start to the joyous sound of human mating, looked with enormous yellow eyes at the kicking legs and pulsing bodies below, then, with a hoot of derision, flapped off for his belated nightly prowling for mice. When he returned many hours later all was still in camp: appetites had been sated and warm blankets covered the tangled limbs of the two travelers and their deeply sleeping pages.

Now they just had the great high plateau of Spain to cross. There were long, delightful days of blazing sunshine and, at night, heated love. They crossed the rivers of Ebro, Jalon, Tajo, Quadiana and Guadalquivir and thousands of smaller streams. They toiled through stretches of desert and struggled against biting storms. At last, rounding the Sierra de Abdalagis, they caught sight of the blue Mediterranean and, nestling on the shore, the proud city of Malaga.

The bishop's connection there was an old Jewish merchant by the name of Santos del Huelva, a man of some importance who owned ships large enough to make their way to any port on the North African coast.

Since the bishop had last seen him, Santos had suffered a series of strokes which had left him almost completely paralyzed but mentally quite unimpaired. From his chair, propped up by many cushions, he welcomed his guests cordially, had them shown to their rooms and hot baths drawn for them and finally, late in the afternoon, listened to their long tale of love, tragedy and adventure. He promised to help them in any way he could and would provide whatever sea transport they required.

They were sitting in an elegant living room, one side of which gave onto a cool green garden court where the dripping of a fountain and the music of songbirds filled the air.

"Children have been denied me," old Santos explained to his four guests, "even though I have lived through three marriages." Here the old merchant gave them a wry smile. "In a moment, however, you are going to meet my foster son. His name is Manuel, and a few days ago we celebrated his twenty-second birthday. Where he originally comes from I don't know: he's probably half Arab, half French. But what does that matter? As a small boy he was found as a stow-away on board one of my ships. There was something in the boy's eyes that caught my interest and made me take him in and trust him. My sixth sense didn't let me down. He is a kind and loving support to me in my weakened condition and, when I am gone, will be a worthy heir to my establishment."

Manuel del Huelva was a slender young man with jet black hair and dark complexion. He sat down beside old Santos after assuring himself of his foster-father's comfort, and then heard from the old man a resume of the events which brought the four guests to their door. He asked several intelligent questions and proposed that he personally take on the matter of transporting their visitors to their destination across the Mediterranean.

"It's so seldom sailors have anything exciting happen in their lives," he said. "Except for a sudden storm at sea, there are few challenges to our energy and courage. I shall go with you. We shall find your Sheik Mabruk and, God willing, Rudi, too." Then he looked at old Santos and added, "If I may..."

"Well, don't be gone too long, my son. If I should pass away a firm hand will be needed in our affairs..."

By now Torben had noticed that the young man's eyes were being drawn time and again toward Raoul who was sitting quietly on the sofa saying very little but looking his very best with his tanned skin blazing behind a white shirt open at the front and accentuating the beautiful lines of his neck and shoulders and the

slight arch of his chest.

They broke up to dress for dinner. On their way upstairs Torben said to Duke Franz, "That youngster can't possibly know about the Knights of the Dagger and the special relationships we have. It will be amusing to see how quickly he finds the courage to make an approach to Raoul."

Manuel del Huelva was, however, an observant and intelligent man. He had sensed the special quality of the friendship tying their guests together and suspected that the same kind of feelings lay behind the enormous trouble they were taking to rescue a fifteen-year-old page-boy of quite ordinary origins. All of this had suggested to Manuel that in their guests love flowed in the same course as in himself.

Years ago, when Manuel was fifteen himself, he had discussed his feelings, and his nature, with his foster-father. Although Santos himself had no interest in relations of this character, bitter experience with the Catholic clergy and the rabble they often incited against the Jews had made him tolerant as few others of his time. The boy Manuel found a friend and a sympathetic ear in the old merchant. It had therefore been glances of understanding and support that the two had exchanged over Raoul's curly head.

That night, after supper, Raoul was the last of the guests to leave the living room. The boy kept postponing his departure because he felt more and more that there was some kind of dynamic tension between him and Manuel, that the handsome young man might just be drawn to him – and he hoped very much that this was the case.

Then he saw, hanging from a wall, a fine old lute and, seeing his chance to show his talents to advantage, he asked if he might try it out before going to bed.

"Of course," Manuel said. He took it down from its hook and handed it to the boy. "You can bring it to my room – you won't disturb the others if you play it there."

They said good-night to the old merchant and made their way upstairs.

"You're called Raoul," Manuel began. "That's a French name, but you speak Spanish like a native?"

Raoul told him his story, finishing, of course, in Manuel's chambers.

"Now," Manuel said, when he had heard Raoul out, "you don't really have to play that instrument if you don't want to."

Raoul gave Manuel a short, proud glance, took up the lute without comment and tried the strings with his fingers. He groped for a few minutes, tuning them, then strummed. The sound was large and beautiful and he immediately opened his voice to an old Castilian melody he had once sung for Rudi.

The shock, to Manuel, was immediate, and almost physical. From the first notes, the blending of adolescent voice and plucked strings, Manuel recognized a natural talent, a singing which was untrained but true supported by knowing fingers. He sat back, overwhelmed with admiration at not just Raoul's skill but at the deep feeling the boy was able to pour into the fine old song.

"I offer you my apologies," Manuel said when Raoul had finished. "I honestly hadn't expected such talent."

"So I noticed," Raoul teased, laying aside the lute. "You thought I was just making an excuse to be alone with you."

"You keep your eyes too well about you, my boy. Again I apologize. If you'd rather I didn't pester you, please say so at once." He looked anxiously at the boy who at first stared back at him seriously, then suddenly smiled.

Raoyl sings for Manuel



“No need for apologies,” Raoul said, “As a matter of fact, you were quite right.”

Manuel found his heart was trying to climb out of his young chest and into his throat. A happiness such as he had never experienced before paralyzed him for a moment, so that he could neither move nor speak. Then he stood up, somewhat stiffly, and went to the boy, who was on his feet and waiting. Without hesitation Raoul accepted the open arms, nestled against the man, lifted his smiling face. Their lips met, and all about them, the little room where Manuel had grown up, their separate and mysterious beings, faded away. Now they were at the navel of existence, suspended in empty space. Love was their only reality. With hands trembling from eagerness they searched each other, penetrating beneath clothing which, piece by piece fell to the floor until, naked at last and nearly hysterical with the possession of the warm beauty of one another's body, they fell into Manuel's bed.

Now hour after hour they loved each other, the waves of fulfillment gathering slowly and breaking over them with incredible flesh-scented beauty, to let them drowse for wordless minutes, until the tide turned and the next wave gathered to rush through their bodies once again, the cycle repeated over and over until the weak beams of early morning sun began to brighten the room and they fell deeply asleep at last in close embrace.

There were only three guests at the breakfast table at eight o'clock the next morning. Duke Franz turned to old Santos del Huelva and inquired politely if someone had tried to awaken their companion.

“Yes,” the old merchant said, “he is awake now and should be here shortly. Unless I misjudge all of you very badly, I see no reason for withholding the information that he has spent the night with Manuel in Manuel's bed.”

Noting the gravity of old Santos's face, Duke Franz laughed. “I expected as much. In fact Torben and I and Heinz were very much hoping something of the kind would happen.”

“Raoul needs a good man like your son to look after him,” Torben added, “so we intend to congratulate them when they finally show up for breakfast.”

Two days later they sailed out on the Mediterranean on board old Santos's ship *Andalucia* under fair skies and favorable winds from the west. When the hills of Spain receded into the purple distance Manuel asked the four travelers to come into the owner's cabin for a brandy toast to the success of their venture, and they were just sitting down on the narrow bed and window seats when a tremendous commotion broke out above their heads.

“My God, it sounds like pirates!” Manuel swore and lunged for the companionway, only to be confronted by the captain coming down.

“No, Master Manuel, it is a stow-away, a violent man with a knife and shouting some language we don't understand.”

They rushed onto deck, and there, standing on the cabin roof was Sigismund Vogel, the black valet of Felsen. “Now you will die, all of you,” he screamed. There was madness, as well as hate, in his face. “Two masters I have seen cut down by Torben Lerche, God rot your evil eyes!” And he brandished his knife as though he were in command of the proud *Andalusia* rather than a lonely and cornered enemy.

“So it is a fight you want,” Torben shouted. “Come down here onto the deck. One of the pages will lend you his rapier.”

“I don't fight that way.”

“So I've noticed.”

Now there was a whirring sound in the air above their heads. Torben looked up just in time to see Heinz swing past on a rope toward the menacing black figure on the cabin.

Vogel saw the attack too late. He gave a shout, lifted his knife, but Heinz caught him with both feet in the center of his chest and knocked him overboard into the roiling wake of the *Andalusia*. Then a horrifying scream reached their ears. Rushing to the after rail they realized that a school of sharks had been following the ship. They were now proceeding to dismember the flailing villain as he receded in a bloody foam into the distance.

Back in the cabin again, Manuel spread a map of North Africa on the chart table.

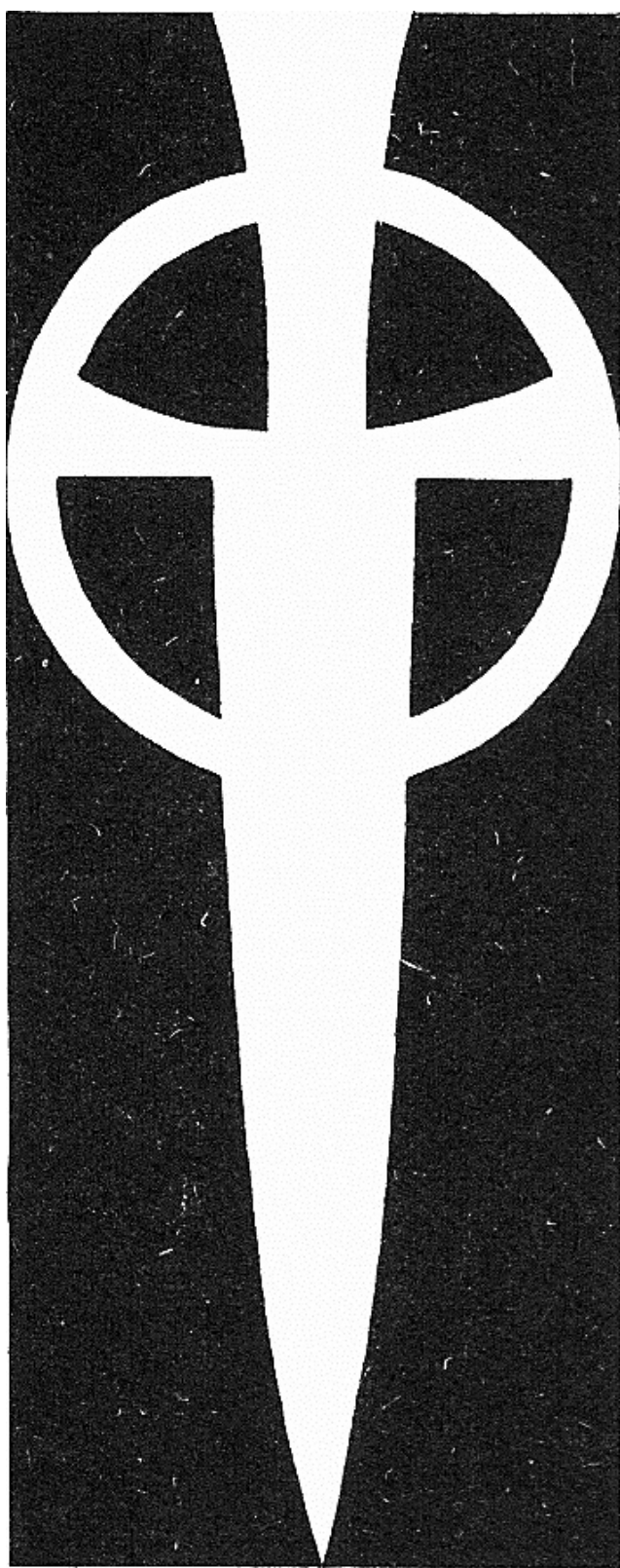
“With this breeze we should reach our destination by dawn the day after tomorrow,” he said. “I propose, now, not to go to Oran, for if that black villain could find us, others may know about our journey, too, and I am not sure of the reliability of the Sultan. Instead we will sail around Cape Farrat and debark in the Gulf of Arzew. We have trading connections there where I can provision for our trip to Sar-el-Sidh.”

Two mornings later they were on horseback again, moving out of the dusty little Algerian port under azure-blue skies.

“Is this the first time you have ridden an Arabian horse, Torben?” Manuel asked. “No? But I’ll wager it is for Raoul and Heinz. They are the perfect mounts, for they move like the wind, with unbelievable smoothness, yet have heart and endurance and courage in battle...”

Manuel turned out to be a wonderful companion, speaking rather good Arabic, understanding the people and knowing the hazards to be avoided. Their route took them along the coast for some hours. To their right was the sparkling sea, to their left gentle hills, now brown in the autumn drought. Late in the afternoon they spied, through a gap in the hills, a rugged mountain range a little farther inland, and here they turned away from the sea and began winding their way up a dry water course.

By the time evening spread its deep twilight across the sky they were camped only a mile or two from Sar-el-Sidh. But those were miles they would have to do on foot, for they must scramble up the steep mountain side, edge along rock ledges, plunge down into box canyons and up the other side. Sar-el-Sidh was brilliantly positioned for defense. They would reach it, in daylight, the next afternoon.



The Siege

It was a busy time after the sheik's hunting party returned to Sar-el-Sidh. Defenses were prepared, weapons examined and inspected, supplies gathered and stocked, small cracks in the walls and buildings repaired – and all of it had to be done with the speed of lightning, for spies sent into Oran reported that Sultan Nasram was collecting a vast army and would be mounting his attack in the next few days.

When the sun glinted off the arms of the first warriors gathered before the castle walls everything was ready for a prolonged siege. Sheik Mabruk looked with sadness at his faithful soldiers manning the defenses. How many of them would fall in battle? How could he save his sheikdom, and the lives of his subjects?

The enemy set up camp before the walls but out of range of the defenders' arrows. If the army was routed it would have to pour through the narrow pass, where a few hundred mountain men could roll rocks down on them and slay them to a man. But Sheik Mabruk had left the pass unguarded. He couldn't afford the men. Besides, if the sultan took it easily he would reason that it wasn't worth guarding heavily. A handful of the sultan's men could be better overcome later if strategy required.

Now more and more soldiers of the sultan appeared. They trampled on the irrigated fields which stretched away from the castle. As the size of the attacking army became apparent uneasiness settled on the people of the castle. But still the army waited. From time to time Rudi could just make out the sultan in the far distance, riding on a horse which must have been as strong as Nasram was fat. Every time Rudi saw him he was in a different costume: the first day in flowing robes of purple, the next day in blue and orange, sometimes in white and gold, at others in sky-blue silk encrusted with silver. And Rudi swore then that, if he got the opportunity, he would drive his dagger into the fat sultan's heart just as the sultan had once driven his contemptuous zeb into him.

Two days later the sultan made his first move. Ladders, rams, assault-towers and catapults were moved into position, and then, in an ear-splitting din, the battle began, with curses screamed by soldiers on both sides, arrows whistling into the air and clattering against stone and shields, boulders booming against the walls and the great rams crashing against the iron gate.

The sheik's men had no difficulty withstanding the first attack. After an hour of fighting the Sultan withdrew his forces, but it then became apparent that he had divided his army into two or more divisions and was moving fresh troops against the castle. The attack was resumed without the defenders having time to rest.

Rudi and Djuna found themselves in the full melee of battle. Whenever an assault tower was moved against the walls and a small contingent of the sultan's men disgorged onto their defenses, Rudi was there with his rapier to help drive them back. Time and again his dagger flew through the air, finding its mark, only to be proudly plucked out of a stilling heart and returned by Djuna, who fought by the side of his young European friend with a razor-sharp scimitar which he brandished with the agility of a juggler.

And so it went all through the long blood-stained day, until the shadows of evening began to creep out from the mountainsides and cover the valley, and then at last the sultan withdrew his forces to rest.

That night Sheik Mabruk walked upon the walls and spoke quietly with his loyal defenders. Below him

burned the hundred fires of the army of their enemy, an enemy occupying his fields, trampling his grain under foot, cutting down his olive trees, slaughtering his cattle for meat. Sheik Mabruk had suffered an ugly cut across his brow but aside from that he was unharmed. He walked from man to man, congratulating each on his bravery and urging some to rest for the battle which would be renewed the next day. A light watch was posted on the walls; the others filed down into the court to eat and sleep.

"I seriously doubt if our men can hold the castle very much longer against such an enormous army," Sheik Mabruk confessed to Rudi and Djuna when they retired to the sheik's chambers. "Our losses are a tenth theirs, but their forces are fifty times ours. We must get word out to the coast. We have secret supporters in the village of El Jamal. A hundred soldiers could retake the pass and trap the sultan with his troops. We would have a siege within a siege, and in that kind of endurance contest we would certainly prevail."

"I will go," said Djuna. "Even at night I can find my way to El Jamal."

"There is no moon," said the sheik.

"So much the better. I won't be seen by the sultan's men."

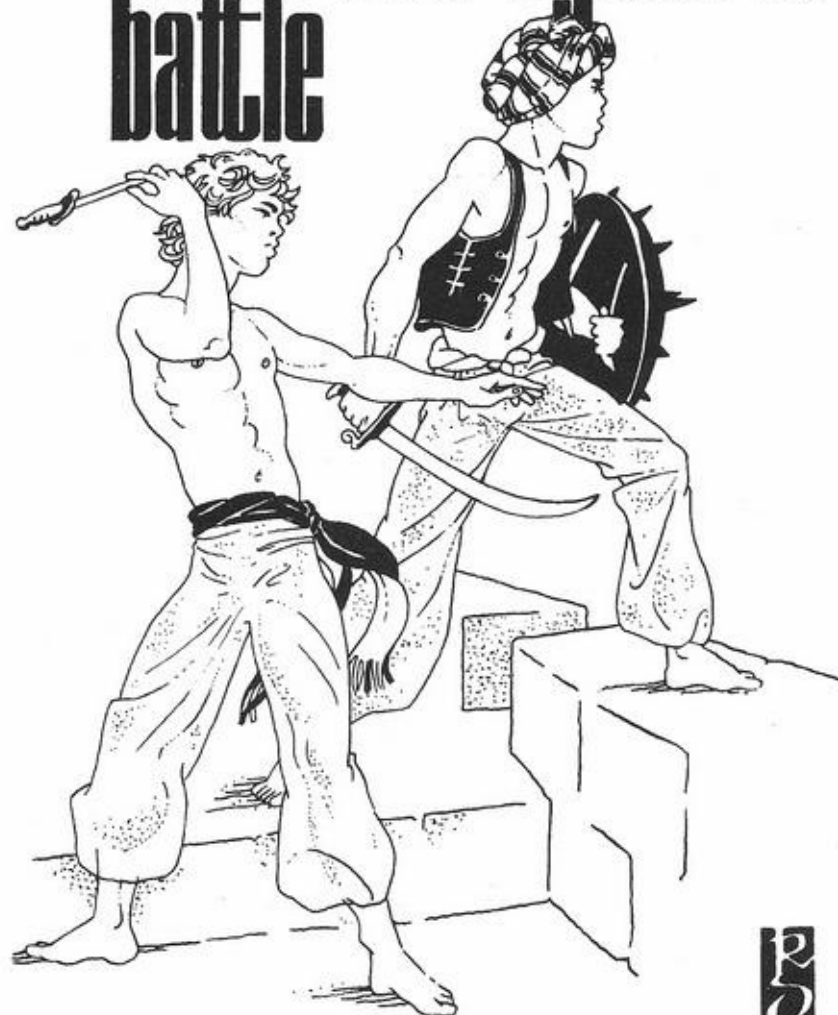
Sheik Mabruk sighed. "Djuna, you mean as much to me as this castle. It's a terrible climb at best. Since I inherited Sar-el-Sidh three men that I know of have plunged to their deaths from the knife ridge above Wadi Zuz."

"They were careless. And one was caught in a wind storm. I shan't be careless. The lives of those I love will hang on my success."

Sheik Mabruk nodded gravely, then went to his desk and brought out a golden chain from which dangled the dagger medallion. He placed it around Djuna's neck and said, "Today you richly earned this honor. You are to show this to a man called Hasan Amasin in El Jamal and tell him of our situation. You will then lead him and his men back to the strongholds at the pass. Do you think you can do all of this?"

"Yes," Djuna said, "but I will need some sleep first. It will only take me five hours to reach El Jamal. I should be able to rest until midnight and still be there at dawn."

Rudi and Djuna in battle



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Sheik Mabruk turned to Rudi and asked politely if he would excuse them. "This is a time when two Knights of the Dagger, man and boy, must be alone."

It would have taken a very clever spy indeed, in fact one with extraordinary eyesight, to have seen Djuna, dressed in black, creep over the back wall of the castle and let himself down on a rope to the rocky slope below. There the boy paused for a minute or two to let his eyes adjust to the dim starlight. Then he set off, at a crouch, taking the greatest care that his feet didn't dislodge a rock and so alert any sentries the sultan may have posted along this impregnable side of the castle.

Now he was climbing. He could look down on the sea of fires' set before the enemy tents, burning low, for the troops were mostly asleep. Occasionally an errant breeze brought to his nose the smell of their smoke.

The mountainside steepened. He was climbing as much with his hands as with his feet, working his way toward a notch which showed itself from time to time against the Milky Way. At last he scrambled over a ledge and found himself in this small cleft. He paused for a moment, casting one last look toward the castle which had been his home since he was eight years old. He wished his master and Rudi and all his other friends in Sar-el-Sidh the blessing of Allah on the morrow, and then set off in a dog trot to the other side of the mountain.

What he looked down into, then, from a sheer cliff, was the most devastated, contorted landscape imaginable, a jumble of jagged cliffs, loose rock-spall and meandering canyons. But there was a way down, he knew. He dropped to his stomach and, hanging over the edge, felt the smooth rock with his fingers. At last he found what he was searching for, a little vertical quartz vein which had been eroded into a series of toe-holds. He swung his legs over the abyss; the toes of his right foot locked into the first of these miniature steps. He tested his weight, sought with his left hand something to grasp in the same declivity, then gently moved down to the next toe-hold with his left foot.

Slowly, like a patient spider, he felt his way down the cliff, until, an hour later, with his arms and legs aching, he came out onto a talus slope and, with great relief, ran down its yielding surface until he found himself in the bottom of a wadi. There he sprawled on loose sand for a minute to thank Allah for protecting him on his perilous descent – and to get over a sudden fit of trembling which seized him once the immediate danger was over.

Now he moved up the dry watercourse, counting the tributaries on the left. When he came to the sixth one he began to climb up through a narrow chute and a half hour later was once again on top of the rock world, his head seeming to scrape against the vast and starry heavens.

This was the treacherous knife ridge which had claimed so many lives. There was almost a mile of it to traverse. He didn't pause, now, but set off as fast as he dared. In places it was broad as a foot path, but in others it narrowed to the point where it was too sharp, even, to sit down on. And then it was crested with rock towers and turrets which had to be either surmounted or bypassed, all by starlight. Fortunately Djuna had explored this route only a year before and the night air was absolutely still. His memory and his hands and his bare feet told him what his eyes couldn't, and after an hour he was at the end of it.

From there it was an easy run down a scree slope to a larger watercourse. Now only five miles separated him from El Jamal, and it was most unlikely that he would come across any of the sultan's scouts on this side of the mountain. He started off at an easy trot, jumping from boulder to boulder in the dry wadi and, as his spirits rose, couldn't help humming to himself an old battle song he had learned from one of Sheik Mabruk's soldiers.

Suddenly he heard a horse whinny and he stopped dead on his feet. This was a stroke of luck. A slight

gray light was beginning to appear in the sky to the east. If he could have a horse he would be in EI Jamal long before the first rays of sun touched the mountain tops. Peeking around a bush he saw five horses tethered in a group. He stole toward one of them and was just putting out his hand to gently touch its flank when a heavy blow on his shoulder knocked him to his knees.

“Hello!” a man said in strangely accented Arabic. “We seem to have horse thieves at work. Who are you, little rascal, and what are you up to?”

Now several more people ran over and, as Djuna's heart sank in despair, pushed him down into the stony ground. They bound his arms behind his back, shook him, dragged him toward a fire, which was piled high with brush until it burned so brightly it hurt his eyes. And all the time the man who had struck him to his knees was asking him questions, demanding to know where he was going, what he was planning to do.

But Djuna said nothing. The more they shook him, the more they struck him the more stubbornly he refused to open his mouth.

At last one of the others, a distinguished looking man somewhat older than the rest, said something in a language he didn't understand and stepped toward him brandishing a cruel-looking horse whip. At his command a tall boy with hair even lighter than Rudi's grabbed his shirt near the throat and, with a tug that almost brought him to his knees again, ripped it open across his chest.

So the beating, the torture would begin. Djuna closed his eyes and, for the third time that night, prayed to Allah, now that he would have the courage to bear the pain and not betray his friends. If only he could convince these people he was just a poor mountain lad...If only they would let him go so he could run to EI Jamal before it was too late...

But the beating didn't start. When he opened his eyes he saw that everyone was staring at him in astonishment.

“Where did you get *this*?” the man who spoke Arabic asked him, putting his hand behind the little dagger medallion gleaming in the firelight against his bared chest.

“It's mine,” Djuna said. “I didn't steal it, I swear!” “Was it given you by Sheik Mabruk of Sar-el-Sidh?” Now Djuna realized he may have said too much; once again he set his jaw and determined to remain quiet, come what may.

“Would it change your mind,” the man asked, “if I told you that all four of my companions wear the dagger cross, too?” Then he said a few words in a foreign tongue to the tall blond boy, who reached inside his shirt and pulled out an identical medallion.

Relief, and hope, flooded through Djuna's heart “You are *friends*!” Djuna cried, this time in French. “You are Knights of the Dagger, like my master and my friend Rudi from far north in Europe...”

Suddenly he was grabbed by the shoulders and shaken by a dark young man with blazing eyes, until his teeth rattled. “Rudi?” the man said. “Have you seen Rudi?”

“Of course, I told you, he is my friend,” Djuna cried, tears running down his cheeks.

“He is alive, and well?”

“Yes, yes. I saw him only a few hours ago. I was fighting all day by his side on the walls of Sar-el-Sidh. Please, *please*, let me go!”

Now they were freeing his wrists and the man with the blazing eyes was embracing him and pouring into his ear a torrent of words he couldn't understand, until, at last, he *did* understand, and he pushed the man away and, looking into his face, he said, “You're Torben! You're Torben Lerche, and you're alive!

Oh, Rudi will be so happy! You must help me. You must help *us*! I must get an emergency message through to EI Jamal...”

The Final Encounter

Early one morning several days before the siege of Sar-el-Sidh began, Julien de Montferrat, Bishop of Reims, was sitting at his desk examining a ring he had just received from one of his messengers. He drew a piece of sealing wax from a drawer, melted it in the candle before him and let a drop fall onto a thin piece of paper lying on the desk. Next he pressed the ring into the molten wax and withdrew it to inspect the impression it made. Satisfied, he dipped a fresh quill in the ink well and began to write.

An hour later he was on the roof of his palace, dawn coming up around him in the chilly autumn air. He went to a bird cage, reached in and pulled out a sleek gray and white pigeon. He spoke to it soothingly, as though he were bestowing a blessing upon its gentle head, then took a small object from his robes and fastened it to one of the pigeon's legs. Now he released the bird and watched it fly into the air, make a few tentative circles overhead and set off toward the south.

That evening, in Besancon, a cobbler heard a flutter of wings outside his window and a tinkle of small bells. Stepping onto his balcony he found one of his pigeons had returned, and with a tiny canister bearing the crest of the Bishop of Reims. Carefully he removed the object, noted the destination code upon it, went to another bird cage, drew out another pigeon, placed the canister on its leg and released it into the night.

And so, day after day, night after night, the small cylinder made its way south through France, then southeast through Spain: Lyon, Nîmes, Narbonne, Gerona, Valencia, Cartagena, until at last one strong pigeon set out with it across the narrow western neck of the Mediterranean for the North African shore.

At the same time the second day of siege at Sar-el-Sidh got underway. It opened with a furious assault upon one of the castle towers. Rudi didn't have Djuna to fight beside him this time, but his friend the one-legged blacksmith backed him up, whirling an evil-looking spiked ball on the end of a chain and wielding an enormous cleaver with cries of rage and curses of vengeance.

More serious was the relentless battering of the castle portcullis. The losses among the sultan's men wielding the enormous ram were staggering, but no sooner was one soldier felled by an arrow from the walls than another took his place. All through the morning the mournful pounding continued. The stout metal was bending, the frame slowly giving way.

In mid-afternoon, with a loud crash and cloud of dust, it finally fell. For a moment all was silent, then a cheer went up in the army before the castle walls.

Rudi's revenge



Soon the sultan could be seen leading his cavalry across the trampled fields, banners waving, swords drawn and flashing in the sun. Sheik Mabruk watched them approach from one of the towers. Only a miracle could save Sar-el-Sidh now. He lifted his eyes toward the mountains, about to make his final peace with Allah, when something moving there caught his eye. The pass outposts were occupied, but not by the sultan's men: Djuna had made it through to help! Relief had arrived.

Shading his eyes, he saw a small column of horses canter out of the pass and begin slashing its way through the rear of the besieging forces. And now the foot soldiers of El Jamal began to pour through the pass like sand through an hour-glass and spread out behind the enemy. The sheik gave a great cry of victory, leapt down off the walls and started rallying his men to hold the gate.

Closer and closer rode the sultan; at the same time the relief column was cutting forward with lightning speed, and just as the fat sultan was about to lead his cavalry into the breached gate the two forces met.

The sultan whirled around, pale with fury that such an easy victory should slip out of his hands. He screamed with rage, and such was the fear in which he was held by his men that they rallied to attack the five new cavalymen with all their might.

But just then, too late, he saw a nimble figure above him leap from the castle walls to one of the assault towers and throw himself into the air like some great carnivorous cat pouncing on its prey. A dagger gleamed in the sun. A moment later the sultan was lying dead in the sand, a dagger buried to the hilt in his white and gold-embroidered caftan. A scream of horror went up from his men, echoing from the walls to the surrounding cliffs and back again. Now they saw the sultan's horse, mounted by a youth dressed only in a pair of bright red pants, plunging and rearing through the melee while its new rider shouted at the top of his voice, "Torben! Torben!"

The two riders met, the dark young man and the exuberant boy.

"Well done, little Rudi!" Torben shouted.

"I can't believe it!" Rudi cried. "You're alive!"

"Of course. But watch your right." Torben lunged over the back of Rudi's mount and slew a wounded soldier who had been creeping up on him. "Where's your sword? You'll need it, now."

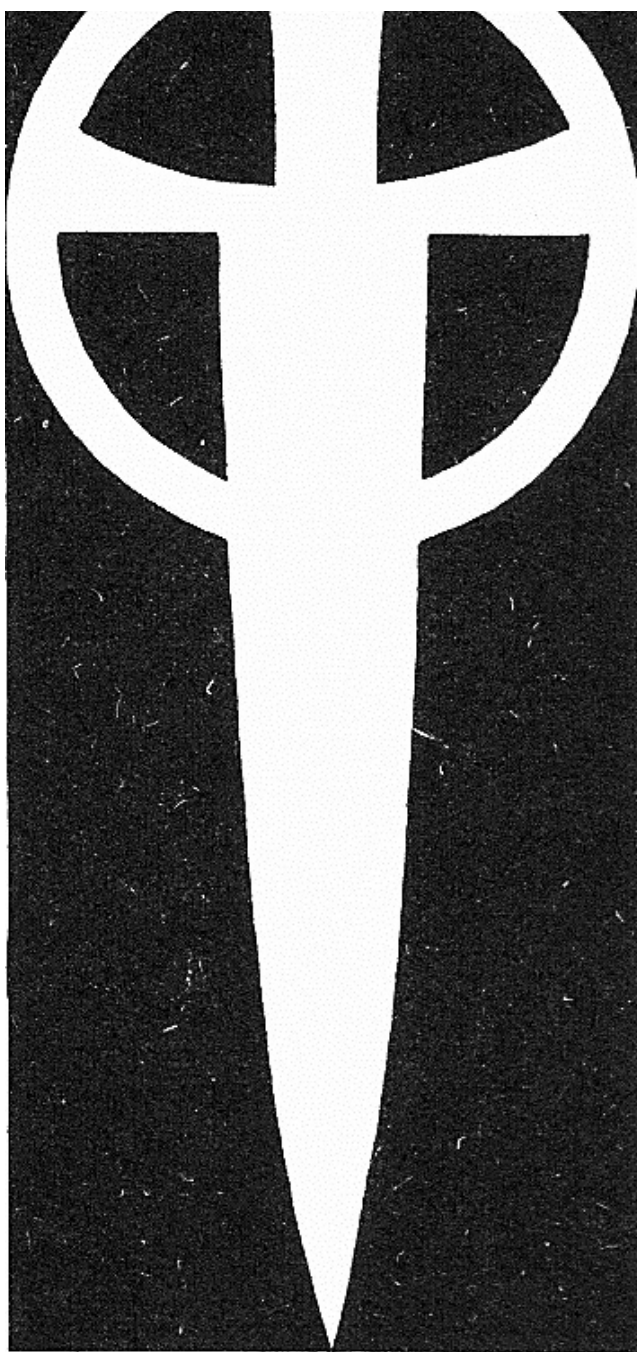
"I'll ride back into the castle. I gave it..."

Just then they looked up and saw the figure of the blacksmith standing firm on his one leg on the wall waving to Rudi with his rapier. Rudi reached toward the sky; the sword fell; the boy caught it neatly by the handle and grinned at Torben.

"Now, Rudi, you can show me again how well you learned your lessons at Magdeburg." And side by side they rode against the enemy.

But the sultan's men were in great confusion: obviously sorcery was at work, and, in addition, there was no leader to follow. The great army turned and as it did news spread of the counter attack on its rear by the men of El Jamal. Back and forth in panic the terrified men ran, in waves which became increasingly chaotic, surging between the castle defenders and the men at the pass, until, just before sunset, they laid down their arms, sought mercy and were allowed to drag their weary way home to Oran.





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Reunion

“There is much that I must tell you,” Torben began, when at last they slipped away from the general celebration in the great dining hall at Sar-el-Sidh and he and Rudi and Duke Franz and Heinz and Manuel and Raoul were received by Djuna and the sheik in their quarters. “The bishop was well when we left Reims and sends his regards. “

“Your little friend Bruno at Magdeburg turned white as a ghost when he heard you had disappeared,” Duke Franz added.

“And Francois?”

For a moment nobody spoke, then Torben said, “Francois died saving the bishop's life. His last wish was that we find you, which now we have done.”

Rudi got up and went to the window and looked out upon the dark courtyard where by torchlight a few of the sheik's men could still be seen laying out the dead for their families to claim in the morning. Images of his short-lived friendship with the young French count swept through his mind: their daring rescue in the wine cask, walking in the summer woods outside Paris, making love... “Not all the good people live,” Rudi said sadly.

He felt Torben's hand on his shoulder. “Maybe, some day, you and I will be as fortunate.”

“Oh, Torben, I just hope it will be at the same time, in the same battle....” And suddenly he burst into tears.

But the feeling of celebration, deliverance from the enemy, of daring feats and victories won, was too strong for mourning. Manuel and Raoul were pleading with Sheik Mabruk to let Djuna dance for them.

“But you don't know the kind of dance he does,” the sheik teased.

“Please!” Raoul argued.

“It's very old, very classical....”

“Let me have that lute. I'll play....”

Djuna, meanwhile, had stripped to the waist, leapt to the center of their little gathering and, as Raoul strummed, started his body moving in the most suggestive and erotic way. Everyone laughed, then clapped, then went silent as the music Raoul drew from the lute became faster and more complex and the dance more athletic, ending, at last, with a provocative leap which sent the sweating, panting boy hard into the arms of his master.

A little later there was a knock on the door and a servant handed Sheik Mabruk a tiny canister. The sheik opened it and drew out of it a thin piece of paper which he proceeded to read. When he finished he looked gravely at Rudi and passed the note to Duke Franz. He, in turn, read it with great absorption and passed it to Torben. All three of them, now, were looking at Rudi so intently that the boy couldn't help asking, “What is it? Have I done something wrong?”

“No,” Torben said, then, “Come here. Have you ever seen the design pressed into this piece of sealing wax before?” He handed the paper to Rudi.

“I think I have. I know I have. It's the unicorn crest that was on that ring of my childhood. What is this? Has someone found my ring?”

“Yes.”

“In the Steindorph inn?”

“Rudi, do you remember who gave it to you?”

“The old woman who brought me up. It is supposed to have belonged to my father. She told me, 'Keep this ring; don't lose it; it's worth a fortune.' But I had it checked by a goldsmith and it was only a plain silver signet ring without much value.”

“Let me read this letter out loud, since it will be of interest to others beside you. It is from our old friend the bishop:”

My dear Franz and Torben, greetings. I bring great good news if your quest for Rudi has been successful, as I never cease praying that it is. Since the delicate creatures which carry this epistle south (beloved of our dear St. Francis) must not be burdened with the weight of prolixity, let me begin straight away by telling you that for some time now I have been secretly conducting an investigation into the affairs of Châlons-sur-Marne, and this has led me from the archives of Châlons to the castle at Magdeburg to the ruins of a notorious inn in Steindorph which you, Torben, will remember all too well.

When I first saw Rudi at Magdeburg there was something about his face which haunted me, but it wasn't until he mentioned a signet ring with a unicorn upon it that I realized what was in the back of my mind. It happens I knew Rudi's father when he was about Rudi's age, and the resemblance is rather strong. Rudi's story, furthermore, was consistent with the family history I related to you the evening before you and Torben set forth for Paris and the rescue of Francois.

The only proof of Rudi's paternity, since the memory of an infant is not available to us, would lie, I knew, in my finding the ring at Steindorph. I shan't burden you with the failures of our first attempts. Suffice it to say that the ring had been discovered by looters after the inn burned to the ground. It was sold to a jeweler, who sold it to one of his clients, who recognized the family crest and tried to use it to claim nobility. My investigators obtained it from his jailor and this very evening brought it to me.

In the meantime I had spoken with the old soldier in the service of Count Vincent de Châlons-sur-Marne who had been ordered to slay the youngest of the count's two grandsons. I discovered that the lad had not been killed, rather he was given secretly to a family relative, since deceased, somewhere in Alsace.

Torben, I would ask that, when and if you find Rudi, before he is allowed to read these presents, he identify the unicorn design of the signet above as identical to that of his lost ring, but even before he does I think I could now confidently assert that, if alive, he is the surviving twin brother of Francois, and, as such, sole heir to a castle and a vast fortune in land and treasure. This pleases me enormously, not just because of my deep affection for the lad but because it would once again rescue this great estate from the control of Abbot Girardeux...

Godspeed. All my prayers are for Rudi. When you find him (I tremble every time I use the word “if”), do hurry home. Rudi will need to make claim in person. I will work to settle his estate in the meantime.

– Julien de Montferrat, Bishop of Reims

There was a long silence after Torben finished reading. Rudi stared at his friend and finally managed

to say, "Does this mean I'm a count all of a sudden?"

Torben nodded. "You're not only a count but enormously rich. And you own a castle so you won't have to do any work at all except play a little politics, with the help of our friend the bishop."

Rudi glanced at the faces about him thoughtfully, then looked at Torben again and narrowed his eyes. "If I do settle down to being a count and give parties and go on nice little hunting trips and all that – will you come and live with me, Torben?"

"No, I certainly won't! I'll pay you a visit now and then, but that would be no life for me."

"As I thought. Well, I won't be a count, then. This doesn't change things between us, does it, Torben? You still want me as your page, don't you?"

Duke Franz roared with laughter. "You're absolutely right, Count Rudi – but the title you can't get rid of, although we will try not to use it too much. Have your adventures while you are still young. Experience the world – learn from it. Later there'll be time enough to enjoy your castle."

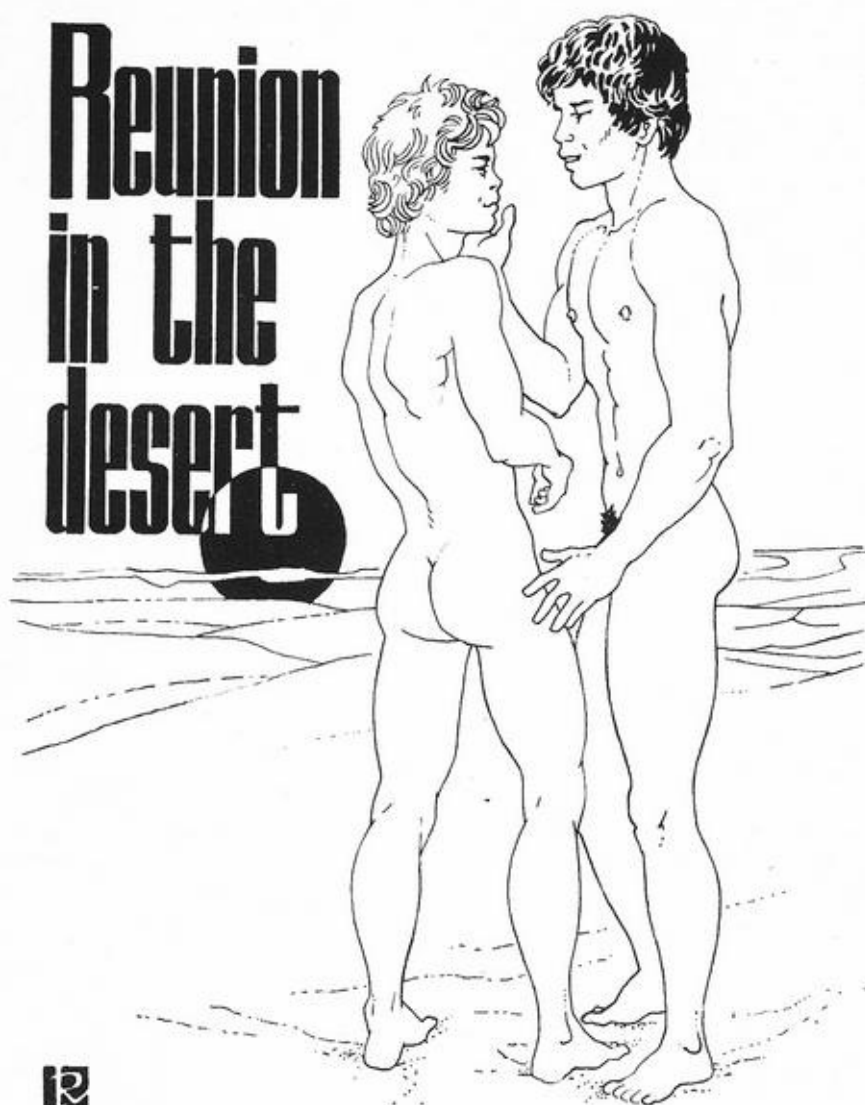
"For the present," Torben said with a smile, "we can always use it as our headquarters between trips."

By now it was nearly morning. At long last Djuna's inexhaustible energy had given out and he had fallen asleep almost where he had landed at the end of his dance, sitting beside his master, with his arms around his master's neck and his head on his master's breast.

"Let him sleep," said Torben. "He deserves a long rest for all he did for us in the last two days and nights: without him we wouldn't be together now. And Rudi and I have things to say to each other and things to do with each other. Will you forgive us if we leave you now?"

They walked out of the castle and into a night just beginning to pale in the east. Up in the mountains they went, not where Djuna had made his daring climb but into the gentler hills to the east. They told each other about all the

Reunion in the desert



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things which had happened to them since their separation in the ranger's cottage near Reims. It was, of course, with the utmost pleasure that Rudi heard of the deaths of the other count of Felsen, Lepreaux and Sigismund Vogel.

By now the sky in the east was a brilliant yellow. They had come to a sandy place which overlooked the vast desert below, and here, in silent agreement, they let their clothing fall away and stood naked before one another, as the brilliant sun heaved itself above the dunes.

Now they sat, Rudi with his head resting in Torben's lap, and for a long time didn't speak, until at last the love and the lust in both of them wouldn't be denied any longer, and Rudi opened his eyes, reached up and drew their lips together.

Life gives us few moments of total, sensual harmony with another human being. Love long denied, lust only partially quenched, all these had prepared Rudi and Torben for pinnacles of bliss they could never have anticipated. Gently Torben turned his young friend upon the soft sand and with infinite gentleness slid into him.

The first wave met them quickly, with the brilliance of a universe exploding, rushing by them and receding into space. But the warmth remained; Torben stayed firm and soon a new wave was building, breaking in the distance. There was no haste to bring it forward. They moved only the slightest bit, and only when they had to. They dreamed in their union. Never had they been so inter-meshed, in their flesh, their minds, their feelings, the very smells and sounds and liquids and breath of one another joining them as for eternity.

At last the rhythm returned, their earlier release giving them time and grace in which to build, to guide the wave slowly upon them. A sharp-eyed hawk, circling above, may have seen the two bronzed bodies, dark head and blond, pulsing in the hot sand, but Rudi and Torben were only aware of the single strand of feeling which ran between them, distanced them from all else but the wave which they allowed to rush upon them at last, break over them with a rich pungency scattering its myriad sparks and stars and this time settle about them spreading warmth and a dizzy sense of happiness.

Afterwards they sat together for long minutes hand in hand, staring like dim-witted children over the dawn touched desert but seeing nothing, the warm mountain wind whispering in their ears but hearing nothing. At last they kissed and drew on their clothes and made their slow way back to Sar-el-Sidh.

There they found a deputy of bearded dignitaries from Oran not only suing for peace but bringing the solemn message that, as fathers of the city, they had decided that Sheik Mabruk should be their new sultan. "No one really regrets the passing of Nasram," one of the elders explained. "Now there is only one man strong enough to succeed him."

There is little more to tell. That Henry of Navarra was made king of France and rebuilt his war-torn county, that his great enemy King Philip ultimately led Spain into decline, that the low countries gained and retained their independence, these can be read about in the records of history. Not so the further adventures of Rudi and Torben, their long lives, their deep love evolving slowly into the kind of friendship which can only be born of earlier intimacy: all these matters belong in another book.

We must leave our Knights of the Dagger, now. After a huge celebration at the palace in Oran, a celebration which involved, one way or another, the whole town, the *Andalusia* sailed into port and prepared to take the Europeans back to Malaga.

"Your hospitality was superb," Torben told Sultan Mabruk as they made their farewells at the side of the quay, "including the battle, which could not have been planned better for a man of action."

"Djuna, good-bye," said Manuel, then suddenly, "Where's Djuna?"

"Here I am!" came a clear voice from the rigging. "I'm a pirate. Lo, I see a sail upon the horizon, a fat merchant ship bound from the Caribbees to Spain..."

“Djuna, come down!” said the sultan. “This is a solemn moment.”

“Yes,” said Rudi. “Remember what happened to you that day in the cave.”

For a moment, as Djuna was climbing back to the deck, he looked bewildered. Then he flushed and made a fist at Rudi and said, “So you... You... Just wait till your next trip to Oran!”

When the laughter died down Duke Franz took Mabruk by the arm and said, “I shan't leave satisfied until I have extracted a promise from you to visit me this year in Magdeburg.”

“Travel all that distance through Christian lands? Thank you, but not on your life. I'd be murdered by one or another of your fanatic holy men. No, men like you will always be welcome in Islam, but I never in Europe. Farewell, my old friend. Till adventure, or necessity, brings you once again to Africa.”

With a fresh breeze and a flock of crying seagulls circling and diving at its wake, the *Andalusia* sailed out into the Mediterranean. Three couples stood hand in hand at the stern waving toward the fourth couple ashore, and the last thing they saw was Djuna's white turban which he had untied and held high above his head to stream like a banner in the wind...