

SPICY ADVENTURE STORIES



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A T H R O A T



Because of his promise to a dying man, he must let the girl he loved think him a coward! There was only one way in which Montespan could protect her and keep his honor

“**Y**OU have been like a son to me—Jacques—for the past three years. I—leave you—the task of caring for my granddaughter—Louise.”

Jacques Montespan said gently, “I shall keep your trust.”

The old man coughed—was coughing out his life in Jacques’ arms. Blood flowed from a sword wound in the thin chest, flecked

TO CUT

By MAX
NEILSON

"You have
courted death,"
Jussac said.
"Now you shall
taste it!"



Du Loire's mouth with each rattling, painful word.

"You will—need to watch—Jussac," he continued. "Louise is only—seventeen—and he has turned her head—"

Jacques' face flushed in helpless anger at mention of Jussac's name. "Jussac gave you no chance, did he?"

Du Loire sighed. "He was—too

swift for me." An amber streak of Paris sunshine came through the leaded window above him, cast a halo about his leonine white head.

Jacques lifted his eyes. The year was 1670. Crossed blades of Toledo steel hung dustily on the far wall. Below them a desk had

been mussed up, a drawer opened. The old man saw his glance, said: "Jussac is a dangerous man. He—came to me—demanding Louise's hand—in marriage. I refused—and he—killed me." The old man stiffened, clutched at the other's arm. "Also he—stole the rubies—which were to have been—Louise's dowry." His glazing eyes went toward the open drawer.

Jacques Montespan nodded grimly. "Jussac's time will come."

Du Loire turned his filming gaze into the features of the younger man. "No, Jacques! You must—not—" His voice died in a moist, choking gurgle of sound; blood rattled in his throat. He died.

Very gently, Jacques lowered the old man's white head to the pillow of the couch. He closed those sightless, staring eyes with a touch as gentle as a man's. And then he turned swiftly as a door opened behind him.

A GIRL stood framed there in the doorway. Her flaming red hair hung braided down her back; her face was an ivory oval. From above her tightly-laced bodice gleamed the upper halves of her youthful breasts. She smiled at Jacques; and then her eyes came to rest on the body of Du Loire. "Grandfather!" she cried out, and ran swiftly toward the couch.

Jacques followed her. Tenderly he touched her, slipped an arm around her little waist, drew her back. "He is dead. There is nothing you can do, child."

She twisted around, faced him. "How did he die?" Her eyes were round, her face filled with a strange pallor.

Jacques' lips were grim. "Jussac killed him—ran him through with his sword. Jussac also stole the rubies that were to have been your dowry."

Louise Du Loire stepped backward. "You lie, Jacques." Her firm breasts rose and fell swiftly.

"Yes. The dog lies in his teeth!" The voice came from the doorway behind them. Montespan pivoted—and faced the sneering, handsome Chevalier De Jussac, resplendent in ruffled coat and silk stocks. Jussac advanced slowly into the room. His right hand rested lightly, ominously, upon his jeweled sword-hilt.

The girl went to Jussac, stood by him. Her eyes were hard. "You heard his accusation?" she looked up into Jussac's face.

Jussac nodded. "I entered in time to hear all of it. And I am sorry your grandfather is dead." His left arm went out, encircled her waist.

Jacques Montespan said, "Keep your hands off her, Jussac."

Jussac's eyes narrowed. "By whose command?"

"By mine! With his dying breath, Louise's grandfather entrusted her to my care. Now I bid you release her."

Jussac stepped forward, away from the girl. His voice was silkily venomous as he said, "Take care, dog. My swordpoint itches to taste your throat's blood."

For a single instant, hate welled into Montespan's eyes. He took a half-step in the direction of the crossed Toledo blades on the far wall. And then, remembering Du Loire's dying warning, he stopped still. His scarred fists knotted, so

that the criss-cross cicatrices on his knuckles loomed out like a sinister network. He forced himself to smile. "Is it the custom of a gentleman of honor to seek combat in a house where death has struck?"

Jussac flushed. "Touching words, indeed—words to mask your cowardice!" Deliberately he turned his back upon Montespan, went toward the red-haired Louise. "Now that your grandfather is dead, my sweet, we need no longer wait. We can marry at once."

She looked into his eyes. When she spoke, it was in a tone that utterly ignored the presence of Jacques Montespan; it was as though she had been alone in the room with Jussac. "I am yours when ever you want me, beloved," she whispered.

"Then tonight you will come to me," Jussac answered boldly. "I shall be waiting for you at the Inn of the Three Lions." He leaned forward, kissed the girl's upturned lips. Then, without another word, he turned and left the room.

Jacques Montespan approached the girl. "You shall not go to him," he spoke flatly, tonelessly. "He killed your grandfather, stole your dowry. You will remain here."

SHE whirled on him, her eyes blazing with scorn and contempt. "You think I shall take commands from you—a liar and a coward?" she flung at him bitterly. "If you were so sure that he had killed my grandfather, why did you not accept the challenge?"

Why did you refuse to cross swords with him when he threw the lie in your teeth?"

Montespan flushed. "I have no proof of Jussac's guilt—yet. I have only your grandfather's dying accusation. That is not enough."

"A thin excuse to salve your craven soul!" the girl retorted. "If instead of you, it had been my grandfather's old friend, The Rapi-er—"

Montespan started. "The Rapi-er?" he whispered. "What do you know of The Rapi-er?"

Louise Du Loire smiled. "My grandfather told me many tales. The Rapi-er was a man bold and fearless—a man whose sword knew no equal in all France. Had he been here, Jussac's challenge would not have gone unanswered!"

Montespan spoke slowly. "The Rapi-er disappeared years ago, child. He had killed too many prominent men. He was hunted by the police for many crimes—most of which he had not committed. The Rapi-er is—dead."

"And you," Louise Du Loire responded, "are a coward!" She turned away from him, went out of the room.

Montespan started after her, and his eyes were sick with longing. For a long time he stood silent.

His shoulders sagged. He left the chamber, went to his own quarters in another part of the house.

LA TE that same afternoon, Jacques Montespan strode into the tap-room of the Inn of the Three Lions. To the leather-jack-

eted host he slipped a gold coin, whispered a question.

The man grinned and nodded. "Come, I will show you the room, messire." Montespan followed him up the twisting stairs to the second floor. "In there, messire," the innkeeper pointed to a closed door. "But take care. The Chevalier de Jussac brooks no dalliance with the woman who is his mistress."

Montespan smiled faintly. "He need not know."

The innkeeper chuckled and went back down the twisting stairs. Montespan approached the closed door that had been pointed out to him. He rapped, very softly.

"Enter!" a husky feminine voice commanded.

Montespan pushed open the door. "Mademoiselle Du Braquemond?"

The woman on the huge four-poster bed was pretty, with a worldly, hard beauty. Her hair was the black of a ravens wing, and she lay back among silken pillows, clad in a thin garment that revealed more than it concealed of her feminine charms. She looked at Montespan, studied his broad shoulders, his tall, straight body with insolent interest. Then she said, "Yes. I am Mademoiselle Du Braquemond. Who are you?"

Montespan entered the room, closed the door softly behind him, bolted it. "I am merely a man—one who has admired you from a distance, and who now has the courage to approach you."

The woman smiled. "A pretty speech, sir. You are very bold."

"I am made bold by the longing in my heart for you!" Montespan

came closer to the bed. He stared down at her; stared at the full curves of her breasts. His eyes swept over her powdered ivory shoulders, her gleaming throat. Her perfume, heavy and barbaric, assailed his nostrils.

She smiled at him, "Are you not aware, sir, that another man has first and exclusive claim to my affections?"

Montespan shrugged. "I am aware only that you set me afire with desire for you," he whispered. His arms went about her shoulders, drew her toward him.

For a single instant she tried to push free of his embrace. Then, with a tiny laugh, she submitted to his caresses. "You are a bold rogue!" she smiled. "And—I like bold rogues!"

He kissed her; and her red lips parted wetly under his questing mouth.

She drew a sharp breath; Montespan's lips slipped from her mouth, down along the smooth, perfumed column of her throat, over her shoulders. Her arms went about his neck . . .

IT WAS dusk when Montespan said, "It is time for me to depart. Jussac may arrive here earlier than you expect—"

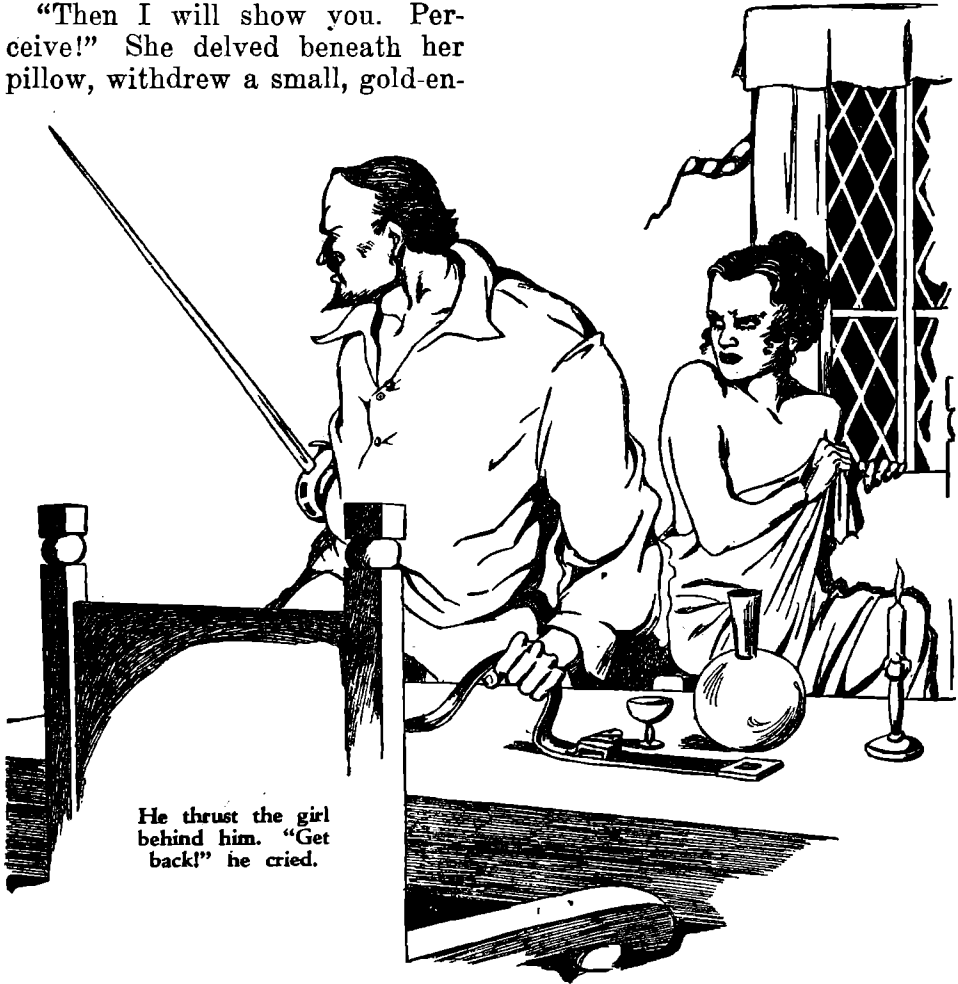
The woman laughed softly. "Jussac will come here to me no more!" she whispered.

"You mean—he has cast you aside?"

She grinned through the gathering gloom. "You may call it that, perhaps. But it cost him something."

"I do not understand," Montespan pretended stupidly.

"Then I will show you. Perceive!" She delved beneath her pillow, withdrew a small, gold-en-



He thrust the girl behind him. "Get back!" he cried.

crusted box, opened it. "Rubies!" She fondled the stone greedily. "A fortune in rubies! Jussac gave them to me today—this very noon. With them he bought his release from my arms. He has a younger light-o'-love now."

Montespan stared at the gems; and his heart leaped into his throat as he recognized them. Abruptly his face went grim. "Give me those stones!" he rasped.

The woman shrank back from the venom in his voice; her face went pale beneath the rouge.

"What do you mean?" she cried out.

For reply, Montespan hurled himself at her; caught her throat between his curling fingers. She gasped, clawed at his hands, tried to beat him away from her. Grimly he squeezed his thumbs against her windpipe; squeezed until suddenly she sagged backward into unconsciousness.

With strips torn from the bed's sheeting, he bound and gagged her. Then he snatched up the gold-encrusted box with its pre-

cious freight of blood-red rubies. To the unconscious woman he blew a mocking wiss; then he turned and leaped from the room.

BACK in the house where Du Loire had died, Montespan flung himself up the stairs, stopped before the red-haired Louise's closed door. He knocked; raised his voice in grim triumph. "Louise!" he cried out. "Come here, my sweet. I have with me the proof that Jussac killed your grandfather! I have the rubies he stole—the rubies that will be your dowry!"

There was no answer from behind the closed door. A tomb-like silence pervaded the entire house. Montespan twisted at the doors handle, wrenched it open. The room was dark, empty. He lighted a candle, held it in trembling fingers. There was a note pinned to the wall. It was from Louise. She had left the house—forever. She had gone to the Chevalier de Jussac . . .

Montespan turned, stumbled out of the room. He entered the chamber where the body of his old friend Du Loire, the girl's grandfather, still lay. In the flickering light of the candle, Du Loire's tired face seemed serene, peaceful . . . peaceful with the deep peace of death.

For a long moment, Montespan stared into those dead features. Then he went to the far wall, took down the crossed Toledo blades. He returned to Du Poire's body. "It has to be, old friend!" Montespan whispered. "The Rapier must . . . return . . ."

AT THE Inn of the Three Lions, Louise Du Loire looked into Jussacs face with widened eyes. "But—but beloved, you said that we would be—married—tonight!"

Jussac smiled, secure in the knowledge that the little room's door was firmly bolted. "What is marriage?" he said softly, mockingly. "Is a meaningless ceremony necessary for our love?"

Louise shrank back from him, suddenly afraid. "I—I do not understand you!" her voice trembled. "Now that I have come here to you, you seem . . . different . . ."

Jussac caught her by the shoulders, pulled her roughly into his arms. "What is there to fear?" he whispered. "You love me, do you not?"

"I—I don't know!"

"Then you will soon find out!" Jussac's eyes gleamed. His hands went to the laces of her bodice, ripped at them. He tore the garment from her shrinking body. She opened her mouth to cry out; and he clamped his lips over hers, smothering her screams.

At which moment, Jacques Montespan stepped into the outer room of the Inn of the Three Lions.

The taproom was crowded, roistering, noisy; but a sudden hush fell over the room at Jacques' entrance. His hand rested grimly upon the hilt of a sword scabbarded at his side; the knuckles were taut, so that criss-crossed cicatrices showed whitely like ancient saber-scars. His face was expressionless; deep lines showed at the corners of his mouth. His eyes were cold with the coldness of a deadly snake, so that men

quailed before his glance and stumbled from his path.

He went to the leather-jacketed inn-keeper. "Where is the Chevalier de Jussac?"

Mine host paled. "He—he—I am not sure he is here, messire," the man trembled.

"He is here. Where is he?" Montespan's voice was as cold as winter ice upon the Seine; as deadly as a pronouncement of doom.

The innkeeper licked suddenly-dry lips. "I—I have seen you before, messire, have I not?"

"I was here this afternoon. Where is Jussac?"

Desperately the other man fenced for time. "Not this afternoon, messire. I have seen you before that—years ago—"

"Where is Jussac?" Montespan's voice stung like a whiplash.

"He—he is in that room over there . . ." the innkeeper pointed to a closed door at the far end of the taproom.

"Knock for him. Summon him forth."

"But—he left instructions that he was not to be disturbed, messire—"

"Summon him!"

The innkeeper turned, stumbled toward the closed door. Timorously his knuckles resounded against the portal.

THE door flung open. Jussac stared out; and his eyes were narrowed, raging. "Did I not wish to be undisturbed?" he roared.

Jacques Montespan stepped forward; stared into the room over Jussac's shoulder. He saw Louise, cowering in a far corner. She

tried to pull the ripped shreds of her bodice up over her tiny breasts. Montespan said, "Come forth, Louise. You are going with me."

Jussac's dark face clouded thunderously. "So! You have the audacity to come here, eh, dog?" he snarled. "Did I not warn you today that my sword's point thirsted for your throat?"

Montespan disregarded him. His eyes were on the red-haired Louise. "Come out, my dear. It is my command."

The girl swayed as she moved forward out of the little room. Her eyes were wide with fright . . . with a nameless terror . . .

Jussac stayed her with a rough, outflung hand. "Get back in there!" he snarled.

Montespan's eyes flashed sudden hell-fire. "Take your hands off that girl, Jussac."

Jussac sneered. "Since when did the rabbit turn wolf?"

Montespan's face was impassive. "Draw your blade, Jussac."

The other man laughed. "It is well. You have courted death. Now you shall taste it!" His hand leaped toward the hilt of his sword; the gleaming blade slithered outward like a live thing. But though he moved with the swiftness of an uncoiling snake, Montespan was faster. Montespan's rapier danced from its sheath like lightning from a clear sky. And as his blade met Jussac's with a sudden shrill clangor of steel against steel, the innkeeper went white—

Went white, and gasped, "Now

(Continued on page 115)

A Throat to Cut

[Continued from page 79]

I know where I have seen you!" He pointed a trembling finger at Jacques Montespan. "You are wanted by the police all over France! You are The Rapier!"

At his words, Jussac took a half step backward. His face turned a mottled grey. "The Rapier—you!" He stared at Montespan.

Montespan nodded. "On guard, Jussac!" his voice was brassy, frigid.

Jussac lunged with the sudden fury of desperation—the desperation of a cornered rat. His blade sang out, licked at Montespan's throat. Montespan countered, swept his adversary's point aside. Montespan's rapier was like a thing of living, breathing steel, darting, flicking, whipping at Jussac's frantic guard, smashing it down.

And then it happened—a thrust so lightning-swift that the eye could not follow its lunging symmetry. Jussac cried out in sudden agony, clutched at his ripped throat, dropped his own blade with a thin metallic clatter. Blood gushed from Jussac's severed carotid artery in crimson spurts. He staggered, swayed—and collapsed to the floor at Montespan's feet.

"Dead! You've killed him!" the innkeeper screamed.

But Jacques Montespan was not listening. He had sheathed his blade; now he grabbed at Louise Du Loire's bare arm, dragged her past the gauntlet of staring eyes

that surrounded them, carried her swiftly out into the night.

She trembled against him. "You—killed him!"

"Even as he killed your grandfather!" Montespan responded tonelessly.

"But—you were sure?"

"I found the proof. I found the rubies he stole."

"And—you are really—The Rapier?"

Montespan nodded grimly. "I am the Rapier—with a price on my head."

"They shall not take you!" the girl whispered frantically. She clung to him, so that her breasts were pressed against his arm as they ran through the deserted streets. "I won't let them take you from me!"

Jacques Montespan looked down at her. His brows rose, uncompre-

hendingly. "Why do you say that, Louise?"

"I say it because you risked your life for me tonight. Because you saved me from—Jussac. Because you were willing to expose yourself as The Rapier—a man with a price on his head—for my sake."

"Are those the only reasons, Louise?"

She choked. "And because . . . I love you, Jacques!" she whispered faintly.

THE sailing vessel "Perle du Bresil" departed from Rochelle the following dawn, bound for the New World—America.

Jacques Montespan and Louise Du Loire were upon it. And as the coast of France faded in the morning mists, a rising sun cast its red rays upon Paris—a Paris which they were leaving forever . . .