

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 32

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1924, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$5.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 66 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Fortune's Fools

By SEABURY QUINN

*A thrilling weird story out of the Dark Ages—a tale of wolves who were men and men who were wolves—a story of a Provençal soldier of fortune and a beautiful girl, who indeed were Fortune's fools*

## 1. A Solitary Horseman Rides

COLD as polar ice, thin-strained as a sophisticated schoolman's logic, the moonlight flooded down the smalt blue sky, a spilth of argent luminance that laid a silver plating upon tree and bough and twig, on rock and scanty, frost-scarred turf, struck a thousand glittering reflections from the stars that glinted diamond-bright against the purple heavens, and picked dazzling highlights from the million tiny facets of the hoarfrost's rime. So bitter cold it was that whip-sharp crackings sounded from the frozen tarns where ice twice frozen ruptured into spider-webs of splayed-out fissures. The dry, dead leaves that clung like corpses hanged in chains upon the oak-trees' branches beat against each other with a clacking rustle like the brittle crackle of a crumpled parchment. The horse's hooves struck on the frozen earth as on the flints of a paved street.

The horseman hunched his shoulders forward in the rising wind and dropped his bridle on the saddle-bow as he beat his hands together to restore stagnated circulation. From crown to knee he was enveloped in an almost shapeless garment made of sheepskin with the wool turned in, a sort of loose surtout topped by a hood which hid his features as a friar's countenance is hidden by his raised capoch. His legs were cased in boots of Spanish leather decorated at the heels with star-shaped brazen rowels. Behind

his left knee swung the metal sheath of a long sword. His palms struck on each other sharply; presently their tempo quickened, beating out the rhythm of a song:

*"Nicolette o le gent cors,  
Por vos sui venuz en bos. . . ."*

His voice rang through the frost-bound uplands and echoed back among the stark tree boles:

*"Bel compaignet,  
Dieus ait Ancassinet. . ."*

Like an echo to his final note there came an answering voice, but not in song. It was knife-sharp, edged with terror, shrill, uncontrolled, despairing, the cry of one who has the terrible foreknowledge of swift doom upon her, yet offers up a last despairing prayer for help, although the possibility of help is hopeless.

Silhouetted like a shadow in a lantern show against the cold effulgence of the moonlight, a figure raced across the hill brow, running with such light swift grace the horseman could have sworn its feet scarce spurned the frost-rimed rocks. Yet even as he watched, he saw the runner reel and stumble, then dash on again, but more slowly, with less sure-footed certainty. The fugitive was tiring rapidly.

Now an ery, long-drawn howl came quavering through the quiet night, and across the hilltop swept three furry shapes, wide-jawed, loose-tongued, eyes gleaming with a light as green as jealousy's consuming fire. If the hunted ran

as though she rode the wind, the hunters traveled as though borne by lightning, and every leap they took made shorter the short gap that stretched between them and their quarry. No hunting-dogs, these; no sleuths or boarhounds. The watching rider knew their cry. He had not hunted in the forests of the Languedoc for nothing.

"Lupins, by the Holy Child!" he exclaimed softly. "Wolves!"

The hunted woman stumbled to her knees, then caught herself and raced with tripping feet along the frost-paved pathway leading down the mountainside. The

horse shied violently as she fell almost between his forelegs, struggled to her knees and held her hands up piteously.

"Succor!" she begged between retching sobs. "Help me, beau sir, or I perish!" Beneath her tippet of bright fur her bosom heaved tumultuously, her supplicating hands were trembling as with palsy. He could hear her fighting to regain her breath in hard gasps.

"Dom Dio, mistress, hast brought thy goods to the right market!" he replied as he swung a leg across his saddle-bow.

The horse gave a sharp neigh of terror as the gray pursuers swept down on them,



"Against the blackness of the entranceway the woman showed in aureate silhouette."

but the man showed neither fear nor hesitancy. "And art thou hungered, Sire Lupus?" he demanded as the foremost wolf leaped at him. "Taste this. 'Twill satisfy thy appetite, methinks!"

His sword flashed forward like a streak of frozen lightning, and the great wolf fell back with a strangling cry so human it seemed it could not possibly have come from lupine throat, then rolled and thrashed about with impotently clawing forepaws, as though it choked upon a bone. But it was no bone that throttled back its gurgling cries, as the ever-widening pool of blood about the furry head attested.

Across the writhing body of their mate the two remaining wolves leaped like twin missiles from an arbalest, one from the right, the other from the left, with the swordsman as the apex of their triangle. When he closes for the kill the wolf is silent; but these were not as other wolves, for as they leapt they gave tongue, and one of them laughed like a man and one seemed growling curses in a guttural tongue, but both bared long white tusks as cruel and sharp as Paynim simitars.

THE man dropped back a pace, half turning in his stride so that his angle shifted and the wolf upon his right was nearer than its fellow. The creature lowered its head as though it had observed the fate its first companion suffered, and was not minded that the sword's point should be thrust into its gaping mouth. But if the beast was cunning the swordsman had more skill, for instead of thrusting with his point he lowered his blade and swung it upward, and the sharp steel struck the leaping monster just behind the point where legs and body join, so that man's weight and wolf's leap blent to give more power to the blow, and fur and hide and belly

were ripped open like a muslin sack slit with a knife, and blood and entrails gushed out on the frozen ground and sent a thin white steam up in the moonlight.

Now the final wolf was on him, and its mouth snapped like the jaws of a sprung trap as it laid its forepaws on his shoulders and worried at his throat.

"Ha, wouldst thou, by the tresses of the Sainted Maid?" gasped the man as he writhed beneath the wolf's great bulk. The monster fought with human cunning, putting forepaws on his arms to pinion them to earth, while it tore and ripped at the fleece hood which wound his neck in its protective softness. They wrestled thus an instant; then the man's hand disappeared in the loose sleeve of his coat and flashed out quickly with a short curved knife. The beast's cry heightened to a scream of pure anguish as the knife-blade ripped from groin to brisket, then sheared a transverse cut across its belly, so that the figure of the Rood was carved upon the monster's underside.

"By'r Lady, had thought that I was finished with the world, madonna," he said as he kicked the dying wolf aside and got unsteadily upon his feet. "Myself have hunted wolves almost since I exchanged my swaddling-clothes for breeks, but never have I met a wolf that fought like these. I know not if they're more like wolves that fight like men than men who fight like wolves."

Of his companion he could see but little, and that little gave him cause for wonder. Like his, her face was hidden by a fur-lined hood, and a tippet of rich fur hung down her shoulders and joined across her bosom with a pin of hammered gold shaped like a coiling serpent. A coat of wolfskin reached her knees, and from knee to ankle her slim legs were wrapped in layer on layer of scarlet cloth. On feet so small they might have been a child's she wore a pair of felt-soled shoes bound

to her ankles sandal fashion with long strips of gilded leather. But whether she were fair or dark, or young or old, he could but guess, since her sable hood concealed her features. He only knew her eyes shone greenly, like a cat's at night, whenever a stray beam of moonlight pierced the little cavern of her camail, and when they rested on him in calm speculation he felt small ripples of swift chill run up his neck and through his scalp—the eery warning feeling he had known when, walking in the forest, he had almost trod unwittingly into an adder's den.

In obedience to his whistle his frightened horse came to him and he vaulted to the saddle. The woman placed her foot on his and leaped effortlessly to the steed's back, where she sat behind him pillionwise, her arms about his middle, her fur-framed face across his shoulder. The spicy, bracing tang of mint was on her breath; from her fur garments came a subtle, luring scent of mingled myrrh and sandal that made him think of the bazars beyond the Bosphorus where merchants from Arabia and Cathay brought stuffs so precious that a single invoice equaled a king's ransom.

"Mesecmeth I arrived in good time for your purpose, Domna," he remarked as they clattered past the stiffening bodies of the wolves and mounted the hard, winding trail. "What didst thou in the wilds on such a night?"

"I sought a—flower."

"A flower? Domna Marye! In God's good name, what sort of flower grows i' this cruel air? Nor e'en the blanchfleurs of the snows could lift its head in such a biting cold."

"I sought a flower," she insisted. "I have need of it. Only in the dead of winter does it bloom, and then by moonlight only. I strayed beyond the castle gates to seek the blossom, and Count

Otto's huntsmen were on quest. But for you, beau sire, I had been killed." A purring undertone, sardonically provocative, cynically seductive, seemed to underlie her slowly pronounced words and run from syllable to syllable.

He pondered her reply. At length: "What sort of men be these who course with wolves for dogs, and in the dead of night?"

"They do not course with wolves, mesire."

"No? Then by the Devil's teeth——" He broke his query half pronounced, and instead:

"Whither would you we should go?" he asked. A vague uneasiness possessed him, a feeling of malaise that seemed to blow a warning trumpet in his inward ear. The woman's arms were wound about him tightly, and beneath the soft fur of her surtout he could feel the supple play of muscles firm and hard as though they were a youth's.

"There is no shelter but the Wolfberg, and that, belike, is worse than none for thee."

"The Wolfberg—Wolves' Hill?" he replied. This everlasting emphasis on wolves annoyed him. Wolves coursing in the moonlight, running women down like rabbits, attacking travelers in the hills; the very castle of the local noble named for them. "Ah pah!" he blew his breath out gustily. "Sayest thou? Then let us go there quickly. Myself am nearly frozen to the bone, and thou must be near perishing. Stray dogs are given bones to gnaw and place beside the fire in Christian homes. Surely this Count Otto cannot offer less to us."

## 2. *Otto von Wolfberg*

THE Wolfberg limned its turrets black against the pallid moonlight. It crowned the highest peak that pierced the barren countryside, commanding from

its lookout view of both the highway and the river, so that no merchant floating goods to market and no farmer with wains of provender for man and beast could pass without the count's permission and the payment of such boot as he was pleased to levy. It had no barbican or outworks, nor any moat or drawbridge, for the hill fell steeply on three sides so that nothing without wings might scale its height, while approach was by a causeway barely wide enough for two mailed men to ride abreast. Who sought to singe Count Otto's beard must come upon him two by two and brave a storm of arrows from the loopholes set above the gate, then batter down a coulisse made of timbers thick as a man's girth and studded with great harrow spikes of sharpened iron. Around the castle's base a stain of shadow showed as black as ink, but through the tunneled entranceway a light gleamed feebly, and by it could be seen a dolphin-headed horn chained to the post beside the postern.

The rider blew a blast upon the trumpet; then, as there came no answer to his hail, sucked in his breath and sounded such a call as set the echoes bellowing among the crags. The tread of iron-shod feet came clumping down the passageway in answer to his second hail, a bearded, unkempt face scowled at him through the wicket.

"What want'st thou, sirrah?" the porter growled. "We feed no beggars here. This is no hospice——" His eye fell on the woman and a grimace of amusement spread across his porcine features. "Ha, Lady Basta, hast been picking florets in the gentle night?" he queried jocularly. "These hills be dangerous for rare morsels. Wot ye not——"

"Open up thy gate, thou crop-eared knave," the rider interrupted, "or by Veronique herveil, I'll have thee whipped for incivility. Go tell thy master, an he

be not in his cups too deep to understand the niceties of gentle usage, that a knight and lady wait without. And mark ye, fellow, let him understand that though I wait, I do not wait with patience."

Surprisingly, the porter broke into a loud guffaw, but he swung the postern back and louted low as the horseman and his saddlemate rode down the entry to the courtyard.

"Be not afeared," she whispered as they left the tunnel and halted while a hostler shambled forward for his bridle. "I thank thee civilly for thy good service, and will protect thee if harm comes——"

"Afeared—I?" he laughed as he swung her to the ground. "Marry, while my sword hangs at my side I have small fear of anything——"

"Thy sword may not be always ready to thy hand," she murmured as a pike-blade swung a glimmering arc behind him and he fell face forward to the kidney stones.

**O**TTO VON WOLFBERG, twelfth owner of the title and least favored of a line to all of whom the gift of beauty was denied, sat in his hall at meat. The table was ten ells in length and spread with plate of gold and silver, cream of the spoil a dozen generations of the wolf's breed levied on the commerce of the highway and the river. Beside him, right and left, his captains and commanders sat, an uncouth, loutish lot with unshorn hair and beards that grew as rankly as a churl's. All were men of mighty stature, great-boned, wide-shouldered, barrel-chested, with hands as huge and red as fresh-smoked hams. Shock-headed pages passed the wine and beer horns, and shoved platters bearing meats before the company, to every man a joint of beef or leg of mutton, or a haunch of half-baked brawn or venison. But there was neither bread nor green thing on the table, no

cabbages, no sweets, no food that grew upon the fields or in the forest; only meat, and that so lightly cooked that it was almost raw.

At the lower tables were the men at arms, coarse of body and unkempt as those who sat above them, and the air was heavy with the shouting of obscenities and the bellowing of drunken laughter. The rushes on the floor had not been changed for days, and sucked-out marrow-bones and bits of rotting food lay in them, festering like offal on a swill heap.

Frowzy slatterns, some thin as witches, some obscenely fat, some almost toothless, some with more hair on lips and chin than any stripling in his sixteenth year could boast, shared the half-cooked meat and sour beer and matched gross jest with ribald answer. But no brats ran squalling round the tables or fought for marrow-bones or chunks of meat among the rushes.

Through the stench of putrefying food and unwashed bodies ran another odor, a rancid, acrid smell to make the nostrils quiver and bring tear drops smarting to the eyes. It was not the odor of the kennel, for there were no dogs to be seen; yet it was something similar, only stronger, heavier, and, vaguely, terrifying.

The hubbub was so great that it was not until the provost guardsmen dragged their prisoner half-way to the table dais that Otto noticed them and brought his fist down on the board with a dish-rattling thump to enjoin silence. Otto of the Wolves' Hill did not rule by love. His frown was a sword and his sword was death. Even the most drunken of the company faltered into silence as the count's fist smote the oaken board, and the guardsmen hauled their captive to the well before the dais in silence still as midnight in a churchyard.

"What have we here?" Count Otto roared, glowering ogrimshly at the captive

stranger. "Speak, fellow, and declare thyself. Who art thou, and how darest thou trespass upon our demesne?"

They had stripped him of his sheepskin surtout while he lay unconscious in the courtyard, and now he stood in small-clothes, a soft suede jerkin of light brown laced high about his neck and topped with a brass gorget at the throat; snugly fitting breeches of the same soft leather cased his legs, tall boots of cordovan were pulled well up his thighs. He was a slightly built, small man with fair soft hair that hung in rippling waves about his neck and ears and gave him from the side and back a youthful, almost feminine appearance. But looked at from the front he showed no trace of femininity, for his upper lip was adorned with a pair of fierce mustachios reaching almost past his cheeks and twisted in the Spanish fashion into horn-like points. Upon his pointed chin a tuft of wheat-blond pointed beard thrust truculently out. His brows, in contrast to his hair, were vivid black, and arched so sharply that they gave his face a rather mocking, questioning expression. Deep set, his little round blue eyes might have seemed humorous had it not been for the curiously cold directness of their gaze. Bound though he was and still half fainting from the pike blow which had rendered him unconscious in the courtyard, he stood with martially squared shoulders and gave Count Otto glare for baleful glare.

"Come, sirrah, speak, or must I twist an answer from ye wi' the rack?" roared Otto, rising half-way from his seat. "Who art thou?"

Cold hatred blazed like frigid lightning in the captive's eyes. "I hight Ramon Nazara y de Grandin, gentleman of Provence and knight of Aragon, and here before thy varlets, trulls and lick-spittles I brand thee traitor to thy chivalry, if such thou ever had, Otto von Wolfberg, and

tell thee to thy ugly face thou art a rogue and villain!"

In the silence that ensued, the moving of a foot among the stinking rushes rustled like a gale among the oaks, and the swiftly indrawn breath of slut and squire and man at arms was like a wind among the crags, for never within memory had any man dared twit ill-favored Otto with his ugliness.

"Now, by the mass, you mew a right brave song for such a little cat, my mal-kin!" Otto's thick lips bared strong white teeth beneath his unkempt mustache, but there was no trace of smile in his hard eyes, even though a roar of gusty laughter swept the hall in applause of his sally.

"Yea, and the cat hath claws to back his mew," de Grandin answered as the laughter quieted. "Do but unloose my hands and give me back my weapons, and I'll engage to write his title as a churl on any of ye; on thee, von Wolfberg, or on that one-eyed oaf who sits upon thy right, or on the pox-marked boor upon thy left, or on yon tangle-headed lout——" Straight down the table swept his cold, contemptuous glance, pausing on the captains and lieutenants one by one, and for each he had some stinging word of insult as he challenged him to combat. At last, when he had called the roll of those at the high table, he cast a scornful glance across the men at arms and shouted: "If any of ye louse-bit underlings dare take the gage your betters fear to lift, step forward boldly and declare yourselves." Only sullen murmurs answered him, and: "What, lack ye guts to fight?" he mocked. "Fie on ye for the dastard cravens that ye be!"

Otto's fang-like teeth flashed in a savage grin. "Had thought to have thy head struck off, but since thou'rt such a strutting little cockerel thou'lt have a cockerel's fate. Conrad Miller's Son" — he

turned to the gigantic one-eyed captain seated at his left—"get thee down and wring me yonder chicken's neck."

"While I be bound?" de Grandin asked sarcastically. "Surely such a bulk of bone and brawn cannot fear of me—or does he tremble lest I strangle him bare-handed?"

"Unloose him," bade the count, "and stand between him and the door to catch him as he flees."

But de Grandin made no move to run. As his great antagonist advanced he fell into a stooping crouch and, blue eyes blazing, circled slowly around until his back was to the table and his opponent facing it.

With a bellow Conrad rushed and aimed a blow with his great fist sufficient to have felled an ox. But the blow went wild as the small Provençal dodged nimbly and Conrad cannoned on, unable to regain his balance. As he neared the table his opponent thrust his foot out, tripping him so that he fell head foremost up against the heavy oaken bancal and sprawled full length, face downward on the floor, unconscious as a pole-axed beef.

"One!" cried de Grandin. "Hast other champions to send against me, Otto Wolfberg, or wilt thou fight for thine own honor, if so be thou hast such?"

**T**HE gleeful shouts with which the rabble had watched Conrad Miller's Son set on his small antagonist were hushed, and through the hall there was no murmur of applause for the small Provençal's agility.

"A compact, Otto," came the prisoner's challenge. "Do thou appoint three others—choose them as thou wilt—and send them to do battle with me with such weapons as they may select. I will undertake to overcast them all. Should they prevail thou'lt have revenge for this humiliation"—he stirred the still unconscious Conrad with his boot—"and some



small sport as well. If I overcome them, I go my way in peace. What sayest thou?"

"The wolf does not make compacts with the rabbit," Otto Wolfberg snarled. "Tie him up again, some of you. To the dungeons wi' him!"

Two men at arms went down, one gasping with sick anguish as de Grandin's boot heel caught him in the stomach, another with a bloody mouth where a small fist had mashed his lips against his teeth, but the struggle was unequal, and within a minute they had laid him with his face against the floor, hands bound behind him, clothes gaping in a dozen places, but cursing with such poisonous bitterness that at last a guardsman stuffed a knot of rushes in his mouth. Even then his eyes were venomously bright, and not until they thrust a pike-staff through his back-bent elbows were they able to propel him toward the door, for more than one stout ruffian felt his boot when they had bound his hands.

Half-way to the door they halted, as a tinkle of small cymbals sounded at the entrance, and all heads craned that way. Against the blackness of the entranceway a woman showed in aureate silhouette. From chin to instep she was sheathed in gleaming golden tissue, its clinging folds no more obscuring her long, slender lines than an apple's skin conceals its shape. Slim neck and tapering shoulders, high, outward-pointing breasts, sleek hips, beautifully turned legs, were outlined as in plastic gold which seemed to flow and ripple with each supple movement. She moved with a slow, gliding, effortless precision, taking short smooth steps which suggested, somehow, that her ankles had been fettered with a weightless gyve. Behind her head, like the nimbus of a saint, she held a tambourine which she fluttered till its brazen cymbals rang a high, thin, laughing note.

De Grandin started as he saw her face. Veiled and only half guessed at, it had been mysterious, intriguing; naked it was utterly inscrutable. Immobile as a carved ivory mask, it was bone-white, calm, bland, contemptuous, with upward-slanting eyes, slashed scarlet mouth, brows black as jet and delicately arched, as though they had been laid on with a stick of sharpened charcoal. Her hair was black as ravens' plumage, but dull as burnt-out candle-wicks, and seemed to soak the flambeaux' flickering light up as black sand might soak up blood, giving back no answering gleam, no hint of scintillation. Smoothly parted in the middle it was drawn tight across her ears and twisted at her skull base in a heavy knot of dull matte ebony.

Recognition flooded through his brain. He had journeyed to Byzantium with Venetian merchants, seen the fabled Hippodrome and visited the Bucoleon and seen its great rooms walled with damask and floored with ivory inlaid with silver. Women like no others in the world graced the City of the Caesars, dark-skinned Persians, ruddy-maned Circassians, Greeks as beautiful as the figures carved upon the cameos they wore. He had seen the travelers from Cathay, too, and, riding on their wiry little ponies, Mongols from the Gobi, slim, high-shouldered men with braided hair and drooping, fierce mustaches, arrayed in lacquered leather armor inlaid with bright gold, and in their wake were women such as this. A woman of the Tartars! What did she in this den of less than semi-civilized Almayns?

She passed so close she might have brushed him with her trailing gown of golden thread, but though she looked at him with moss-green eyes there was no recognition in her glance. For captive and for captors she seemed to hold a cold, aloof contempt, as though she were a princess stepping through a foul street

and they the muck that strewed the paving-flints.

For a moment she gazed at the Wolfberg chief as she stood in the well before his table. Then, aloofly, icily, as though she were alone and did it for her own amusement, she began to dance.

Like a birch tree when the leaves are new and lacy green and sweet winds blow through whispering branches, she swayed and undulated while the tambourine behind her matte black head shrilled softly in repressed crescendos. Then beat by plangent beat the music deepened till it seemed to mimic distant thunder in the hills and growled a warning of approaching storm. The little cymbals in the hoop's ring fell together titteringly, softly . . . softly. The patter of spring raindrops sounded through the branches of the swaying trees. Then the rhythm changed. The roll of Tartar kettle-drums came booming from the vellum head, the beat of unshod hooves upon the frozen earth . . . the thunder of the Golden Horde's resistless charge . . . the rumble of war chariots . . . the clash of arms, the lust of fighting men. The madness that percussion long continued breeds beat in the brains of every man within the hall, and hands reached out unconsciously for swords, or tightened suddenly on dagger-hilts.

Now she held the tambourine at arm's length before her, and round its vibrant rim her fingers raced and fluttered in a wild, staccato, stuttering tremolo while her serpent-supple body shivered in a sympathetic ecstasy. Her shoulders shook and shuddered to the throbbing of the pulsing, roaring rhythm of the beaten instrument. She was quivering faster . . . faster . . . her shoulders jerked and rolled convulsively, twitching back and forth. Not only shoulders, but entire torso writhed and shook, she seemed dancing with her chest, her lungs, her abdomen. She

whirled the tambourine high overhead in her right hand, and its cymbals shrieked as if in breathless laughter of unholy glee. With her left hand, long, slim-fingered, white as ivory tipped with points of coral, she rent her golden gown from throat to waist. A narrow strip of pale white body showed through the wounded garment as she writhed more violently, as if in mortal agony, and from the riven golden gown there was a gleam of pointed breast, ivory white, rose-tipped, peering out an instant, then disappearing like a frightened pink-nosed kitten.

A deafening roar of approbation sounded from the feasters, but Otto Wolfberg gave no sign. He was gazing at her, glassy-eyed, his mouth half open, his face as blank as that of any drunkard in his final cups. Saliva trickled from the corners of his lips, his barrel chest was heaving with quick, labored breathing, like the respiration of a runner nearly spent, or the retching of a swimmer who has almost ceased to battle with an overwhelming current.

Suddenly her maddened swaying ceased. Stock-still she stopped, cutting off the frenzied motion as if she had been turned to stone. Then gold-sheathed arms shot right and left out from her rigid body, and with a jerking quiver she threw her shoulders back, and her young, firm breasts burst from the chrysalis of her torn gown, bright as ivory against gold, beautiful almost beyond imagining. An instant she posed thus, then with a mad crash dashed her hand straight through the tambourine and flung the ruined instrument upon the table before Otto Wolfberg.

The roar that greeted the finale of her dance was like the bellow of a mountain torrent when the ice jam breaks in spring, but she paid it no attention. Calm, aloof, composed, oblivious, she turned and glided from the room with that short,

flowing step which somehow seemed suggestive of bound ankles, and like the shadow of a shifting shadow, or the figment of a half-remembered dream at waking, she was gone.

### 3. *Seen from a Dungeon Window*

THEY took de Grandin to a cell that looked through iron-latticed windows to the base court, but before they fastened shackles on his wrists they stripped him to his shirt and hose and left him cursing like a hissing serpent in the almost zero cold of the stone-floored, stone-walled, stone-ceiled room. The algid floor tiles chilled him to the bone each time he stepped, and in a little time the iron loops about his wrists turned almost white with frost and burned his flesh like fire. His skin began to itch and prickle as goose-flesh formed upon it, and his teeth were chattering like the beating of a drum at muster roll as he felt his way across the almost pitch-black dungeon. Presently his foot struck rotting straw, and he dropped upon the stinking heap and pulled its filth-encrusted shreds about him as if he were a dog that sought cold comfort in its heatless kennel. The night dragged by on leaden feet. Somewhere in the castle was a horologue that beat the hours out upon a brazen gong, and the intervals between its bellings seemed as long as years with endless days. But in spite of chill and wrath and injured pride he fell asleep at last, and cold gray daylight fingered at his cell bars when he woke to hear the castle tocsin beating out a dirge. Shivering, he got upon his feet and looked out into the courtyard.

A little cavalcade of men at arms was entering the gate, and six of them bore litters formed of pike-staves crossed with boughs of evergreen. On the litters lay three corpses, stark, stone-stiff and naked,

and as the funeral procession passed his window he could see the wounds upon them. One showed a sword mark on the throat, a little wound that pierced the skin close by the neck base, and round it was a frozen necklace of bright blood. Blood smeared the corpse's lips and beard, too, and told a tale that any leech or veteran of the battlefield could read as plainly as a priest could read a hornbook. The sword that killed the man had entered through his mouth and struck down through his neck.

The body on the second hurdle bore a cut almost an ell in length, beginning at the level of the arms and running down until it struck the navel.

The final litter bore a corpse on which the Midas hand of winter had laid fingers in the instant of death agony, freezing into immobility the writhing limbs and tortured features, holding in stone-hard embrace the twisted arms and drawn-up legs, the hands that pressed with impotent futility against the knife-hewn abdomen from which the frost-glazed entrails gushed, tracing with a transverse line the vertical and horizontal cuts made by a knife-blade on the thorax and abdomen.

"*Dom Dio!*" gasped de Grandin as he looked. "The wounds upon those human bodies are such as I inflicted on the beasts that beset *Domna Basta* yesternight! *Sancta Dei genitrix*—it cannot be! And yet—" He dropped down to the straw again and scratched a heap of stubble over him. The misery of cold was sharper than his curiosity.

NO FOOD was thrown into his dungeon, and by nightfall the torment of hunger had been added to the scourge of freezing. Miserably he huddled in the straw heap, almost too weak to move, so cold that he could hardly feel the pangs of gnawing famishment. But he leaped up from his bed as the sound of wailing

voices came to him across the base court. Through the window of his dungeon he beheld a little knot of miserable creatures herded by a company of men at arms. Like him, they had been stripped down to their shirts, and as their naked feet trod frost-bit paving-stones they winced and skipped and hopped about in dreadful parody of dancing. Their jailers roared with laughter and prodded them with pike-butts as they drove them to the center of the court. One of the captives, an aged man with thin gray beard and scanty locks, fell to his knees, and though the burning of the icy stones wrung groans from him, he raised his hands in prayer:

*"Mater purissima, speculum justitiæ,  
Mater castissima, mater inviolata . . ."*

he besought, and: "*Ora pro nobis!*" chorous all the others in an agony of hopelessness and woe.

Now the men at arms were on them, beating, shoving, kicking. They flogged the aged man up from his knees and drove him toward the castle gateway, herding his companions after him. Then at a signal they wheeled round and ran, dodging through a doorway, making fast the portal after them.

Like echoes from the banging door there came a chorus of deep growlings and wild howls, and from another door a pack of wolves came rushing out into the court. Gaunt, gray, green-eyed, with gleaming tusks and lolling tongues, they dashed across the frosted stones, their long nails clicking on the flints.

A thousand feet or less they had to run to be upon the shivering, almost naked wretches by the gateway, and as they raced across the court they passed so close beside de Grandin's window he could hear their panting breath . . . panting and something more! He could have sworn he heard one wolf growl to its

fellow: "Poor sport tonight. They will not travel far."

The harried prisoners ran with panic-stimulated feet out in the desert of the frost-bound mountains and untimbered rocks, and after them the wolf pack scurried with yelps and howls of savage exultation.

"*Mo' Dio,*" through chattering teeth de Grandin swore, "men coursed with wolves, herded into dungeons like rabbits in a warren, that they may be the quarry of four-footed beasts!"

He shook the dungeon bars in fury. "Hear me, ye saints of Paradise, grant I may work justice on these monsters, and I will plant your altars thick with candles long as my sword-blade. Aye, for every one I slay, a brace of candles sword-blade long! Attend me, Holy Ones—a pair of candles for each one I slay, tall candles of smooth wax as fair and straight as Easter lilies, candles which shall burn so brightly that a half-blind priest may see to read his office by their glow! You cannot refuse such an offer, but act quickly, Sacred Ones, or I may die before I have a chance to keep my vow!"

As with most Provençals, mingled Almayn and Moorish blood ran in his veins, strengthening and spicing the main strain of Languedoc, and like most Provençals and Gascons he had learned much from the Moslems. At bottom he believed in good and evil, and in very little else, but this never kept him from communing with the saints in almost jovial comradeship, addressing them with all the blunt directness that he used to fellow soldiers, making out-and-out commercial compacts with them or, at times when things were more than usually desperate, laying them a wager of his life against their sanctity. More than once he was assailed by doubts concerning saints' existence, but this did not prevent his praying to them on occasion. The blessed saints were patient lis-

teners and did not force unwelcome counsel on him. So now he prayed with all the fervor of an orthodox believer, expatiating on the beauty of the candles he would give as if he were a prentice hawking wares behind a fair booth and they indifferent or unwilling customers.

Perhaps it was his fervid salesmanship, perhaps the sainted host took pity on his misery; at any rate, while he was still engaged in invocation, a rattle sounded at the dungeon door.

#### 4. *Two in a Tower*

"**B**EAU sire — Messire de Grandin!" came a guarded whisper from the wicket.

"Aye?" he returned, alert. "Who calls?"

"'Tis I, Basta, messire. Come quickly, while the chance remains." There was a snap and squeaking from the unoiled lock and hinges, and the heavy oaken door swung back. Slim hands were on his hands, slim fingers fluttered at the gyves upon his wrists, a key was thrust into their locks and in a moment he was free. "Quick, but be silent," she admonished, and he felt a cloak draped round his shoulders and a hand grasped his to lead him toward the door.

Like a blind man following his guide he crept along the inky passage, mounted stairs as dark as Erebus, sneaked through half-lit corridors, then climbed a final flight of winding stairs which seemed to lead up to the Mountains of the Moon, so endless was their spiral. At last his leader paused before a door and fingered at some secret mechanism, then stood aside to let him pass.

The blazing brightness of the candlelight confounded him at first, but as his eyes adjusted themselves to the glare he saw they stood in a small circular compartment hung with tapestry and carpeted

with bearskins. Two chairs of carved wood stood by the walls, and on one of them was flung a fur-lined robe of heavy woolen stuff, with a pair of monkish sandals underneath. But most important was the object in the center of the room, a wine cask sawn in half and almost filled with steaming water. Beside it was a little dish of almond meal, a hyssop of sweet fern leaves and a pile of linen towels.

"'Twill thaw the dungeon's chill away," she told him as she nodded toward the tub. "When thou hast bathed I have that which will break thy fast above. I wait thee there."

As on the night he met her, her features were obscured by a drawn hood, and her body was enveloped in a loose gown of brown stuff, shaped like a friar's habit. As she stepped he saw her feet were cased in velvet shoes that made her tread as silent as a cat's. "Gramercy, *domna mia*," he returned. "'Tis like heaven after purgatory to be thus entreated. Methinks that I shall sleep more peacefully tonight than last."

Her green eyes gleamed sardonically from the shadow of her cowl as she turned to mount the flight of narrow winding steps that led up from the chamber.

De Grandin wallowed in the steaming water to his heart's content, lathering himself with suds of almond meal and scrubbing vigorously with the fern leaves. By the time he dried himself upon the towels of coarse linen he was in a glow, and despite the need for caution he began to hum a snatch of song:

*"Isot ma drue, Isot ma miel  
En vous ma mort, en vous ma vie!"*

Like a summer breeze that stirs the greenwood in the long still days when lovers wander with joined hands beneath

the verdant bowers came the couplet capping his:

*"Belle amie, ainsi va de nous,  
Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!"*

"L'enfer, you know it too?" Eyes shining with delight, a boyish laugh upon his lips, de Grandin threw the fur-lined robe around him, thrust his feet into the sandal straps and bounded up the stairs. He shoved the brocade curtain at the doorway back and leaped across the threshold, then stopped as suddenly as if he had encountered a stone wall. "Domna Marye!" he exclaimed, and let the breath out slowly through his teeth.

The room in which he stood was circular, conforming to the rondure of the tower, and not of any great size. Its walls were without windows, or even loopholes, and covered with a yellow brocade, gold-embroidered. The floor was spread with deerskin of a light fawn shade, and in the center stood a wide low couch on which a coverlet of baby wolfskins, almost silver-gray in hue, was laid. A candle of sweet-scented wax emitted a soft light, caught and reflected in a ceiling mirror of Venetian glass. Beside the bed was a small table with a top of tight-stretched pigskin which bore a silver platter heaped with food—a bowl of steaming mortrew, a salmon pasty, cubes of game soured in the juice of muscatels and ginger, cakes soaked in liqueurs and glass goblets of sweet wines from Cypress, Sicily and Hungary. Throughout the place there hung a curious, clinging, evanescent odor which seemed to come and go like zephyrs through an open window, and which mounted to his head like strong, spiced Grecian wine. But all of this was only the jewel casket, the setting for the gem on which his eyes were fixed.

The Lady Basta had put off her loosely draping cloak and velvet shoon, now she was cased in a slim gown of bright ver-

million that sheathed her slender body as a scabbard sheaths a sword. Her little feet were bare and white as lily petals, their tiny nails as pink as rose leaves. So must have looked the feet of Lady Enid as she paced beside Sir Geraint when he rode forth to do battle, for the three-pronged lance hight Sparrow Hawk. If she had been bewitching wrapped in folds of clinging gold, she was utterly exquisite in her clinging gown of Tartar red with the ivory of her changeless face above, the snow-white of her tiny feet beneath.

De Grandin's pagan soul that worshipped beauty for its own sweet sake wherever found was thrilled down to the bases of its being. He felt himself go weak with longing so intense it was akin to breathless adoration as she raised herself into a sitting posture with her arms behind her, hands resting on the wolf-skin coverlet.

Smooth, white, impassive as a mask, her face seemed strangely alien to the slim-lined, red-sheathed body set beneath it. The smile upon her vivid scarlet lips was delicately aloof, ironical. She knew her charm, this passionlessly-passionate seductress; her irresistible allure for men was like an instrument she played on with a sure, skilled touch, and yet she was contemptuous of it. Her oblique, moss-green eyes were like a cat's, their pupils black, enormous, almost empty of expression. Her teeth were very small and very white and even—very sharp, too, thought de Grandin as her red lips parted slightly and she smiled at him, half closed her eyes and threw her head back gently.

She drew her child-small pink-nailed feet up from the deerskin rug, swung them upon the bed, and with a lithe contortion got up to her knees. He watched the play of muscles under her close-fitting robe. They rippled like a wrestler's, like the finely drawn, strong sinews of a prac-

tised acrobat. Seductive she might be, alluring as a *houri* out of Mahound's Paradise, but alien characteristics marked her; she was Atalanta, champion of the race, and Trojan Helen in one form, a combination of the chaste Diana and the wanton Venus in a single body.

"Thou must e'en be furnished after thy long fast, messire," she murmured in her oddly purring voice. "Take, eat; those viands are not such as they serve in Otto's banquet hall." With a gesture of her pink-tipped hand she indicated the small table by the wall.

DE GRANDIN fell to with a will. Beauty was a thing to fall down before and worship, certainly, but an empty-bellied worshipper was languid in his reverence, and he had not tasted food for thirty hours. He downed a goblet of red Cyprian wine and a glass of golden wine from Sicily to keep it company, wiped his lips upon a wisp of damask and helped himself prodigiously to salmon paste.

Feet tucked demurely under her, hands demurely folded in her lap, the Lady Basta watched him as he ate. "Dost know the character of thine hosts here?" she asked.

"Aye," he cleared his mouth of salmon with a draft of Magyar wine, "methinks I do, madonna. I have traveled far afield and over the seas, but never have I seen such monsters in the flesh. Yet meseems I recognize them from the tales I've heard. Are they not of that cursed company of those not yet made fast in hell who slough off human shape at will and run wild-questing through the night in lupine form to kill and eat those so unfortunate as to cross their paths? Are they not members of that crew who dance on Christmas Eve, deriding the nativity of Christ, and sell their sinful souls to gain the power to change their shape

to fit their bestial nature? Are they not——"

"Yea, they are *lobis-homem*, known in this land as *wäbrwolf*. 'Tis said the first von Wolfberg bribed a sorcerer to give him power to take on wolfish shape, for so savage was he that he needs must have the beast his form as well as his base nature. However that may be I do not know, but this I know full well: Count Otto and his company are gifted one and all with this dread power. In all this place we two alone cannot shift shape at will."

"And those poor wights I saw them harry from the base court——"

"Were cattle for the slaughter. Their craving and blood-lust runs at spate tide at the full moon, and they scour the countryside between times, bringing in such folk as they can capture and housing them within the donjon till the time appointed. Then they turn them loose and course them, as it were a rabbit drive or deer hunt. A few are liberated every night, and the count and his retainers take turns following and slaying them. The night you found me on the mountainside a pack of them took wind of me and left their kill to follow in my tracks. Had not you met me when you did I had been food for them long since."

"You told me then you sought a flower in the moonlight. Surely you did jest?"

Her red lips writhed back in a soundless snarl, displaying small white teeth. "I jested not, messire, believe me. I sought a flower which should give me power to work my vengeance on these monsters. They took my scent ere I came on it, but haply I shall find it yet." Plainly, she did not wish to talk about her moonlight quest.

He thrust a morsel of stewed lamprey in his mouth and washed it down with wine. "How art thou truly clepèd?" he asked. "Have heard them call thee Basta,

but whether that be surname or fore-name——"

Her smile became less mocking and more bitter. "I hight Basta, nothing more."

"Naught else? How meanest thou——"

"I was born a slave. Like animals, slaves have no names save those their owners choose to give them. My mother was one of a thousand Tartar women sent by Tama Khan to Byzantium as an offering of good will to the Emperor Romanus. My father—perhaps he was a noble of the Emperor's suite, perhaps a guardsman or a muleteer. Who troubles to record the bedmates of a slave-girl, or a slave's paternity?"

"At nine years I was sold to a bear-keeper in the circus. For the next three years I studied music, dancing and contortionism. I was a dancer in the Hippodrome at twelve. At thirteen I was given to a leader of the Greens, and taken by him to Ravenna when he went upon an embassy. *Eyab!* He lost horse and hound and hawk—and me—to a Borussian at the gaming-table, and my newest master carried me with other winnings to Cologne when we passed Count Otto's castle on the river."

She paused and shuddered slightly, as with sudden cold; then: "It was fortunate for me that I am beautiful. There were thirty members in my master's company. Ten were killed in trying to beat off Count Otto's men; the rest, including him who owned me, were pent up in the dungeons till the wolves desired sport and blood." She cupped her empty palms before her: "All are gone."

He dipped his fingers in a golden fingerbowl and dried them daintily on a damask napkin, for he had been most gently reared at the court of Ramon of Toulouse.

"And thou?" she asked.

"*Trânseat!*" He laughed, but not with mirth. "We be a well-assorted pair, we two. A slave-maid and a landless fugitive! My country is the Languedoc, the blessed land of Provence. It was a pleasant place, with smiling fields and bowered orchards and the warm sun overhead. Men lived happy and contented there. The husbandman worked in his fields and vineyards, in the halls the troubadours composed and sang gay songs, or gathered in the courts of love around the fairest of their ladies.

"Then came the wars—the Holy Wars—God save the Mark! Simon de Montfort and his butchers swept across the pleasant land as they had been a bloody plague. We fought them off, we Provençals, and Pedro, the good King of Aragon, rode in the field beside us with his chivalry, but we might as well have tried to beat the rising tide back with our swords. Our foemen showed no mercy. Captured knights were crucified on their own olive trees, or dragged to death at horses' tails. Seven thousand helpless babes and women suffered massacre when de Montfort stormed the town of Bezières, and beneath their flailing swords and pounding hooves the music of our troubadours and the chanting of our poets has been stilled for ever. Our fields are sown with corpses and our orchard trees are turned to gallows. All who remain alive are in one class or other, those who have yielded lands and goods and conscience to de Montfort, or those who fled with nothing but their lives. I was pushing toward the Polish kingdom with sword and services for sale when I met thee upon the mountainside. We be Fortune's fools, we two."

"Perhaps thy troubles near an end. Come, sit beside me," she commanded. "I'll rede the riddle of thy future, an it please thee."



HE DROPPED beside her on the fur-draped bed and gave a sigh of satisfaction. Bathed, warmed, fed to repletion, with the embers of the fire of southern wines aglow in his blood, he stretched in animal content as he kicked his sandals off. "Canst truly foretell things to come?" he asked.

"For others, yes, but not for my own self. Mine eyes are holden there." She took a little phial of red glass from a small cabinet and poured its contents in her cupped palm. It was thick as soured cream and black as ink. She gazed into the little sable pool a moment, and he saw her eyes grow fixed and glazed, with opal lights in their green depths. Her lips were moving soundlessly, like those of one who kneels in silent prayer before an altar. At last she spoke in a hushed voice, soft and murmurous as water flowing in a covered runnel.

"I see thee well beloved and at ease in thine own castle, and round thee cluster sons and daughters to do thee honor in thy age. A woman sits at thy right hand, but I cannot see her face, mayhap because I strive so desperately to see it. But I see thy generations marching down the corridors of time, and some of them strive valiantly on land and sea with those who raise the banner of oppression, and some there are who wrestle manfully with ghostly foes. Thy progeny shall overcome the forces of the phantom world. It is a birth-gift. Ghouls, ghosts and warlocks, vile witches and the mighty company who traffic in hell's commerce shall not prevail against them. In lands as yet unknown thy name and blood shall spread confusion in the hosts of evil."

She drew her gaze from the black pool as though it were a pain to look in it, but a greater pain to look away. "That woman whose veiled face I cannot see, thy consort and the mother of thy children, I—wish—her—joy!"

Her panted words trailed slowly into silence, and he looked at her amazed. It had not seemed to him that she was capable of emotion—except, perhaps, to hate—yet now her eyes were like twin pools of melted glass, their moss-green depths suffused with tears.

He roused upon an elbow. "Marry, but thou read'st a brave tale of the bye and bye," he whispered. "What sayest thou of the here and now?"

She gave a laugh, the first that he had heard her utter—low and rippling-sweet, but with a bitter undertone of tears—as she pressed her forefingers against her lips, then joined them tip to tip and laid them on his brow. "A kiss for thee, beau sire, until the morrow," she replied as she slipped down from the bed and slid pale feet into her velvet shoes.

"Nay, Basta, loveliest of women, hear me," he besought, but she draped the monkish cloak about her and drew its cowl up so it hid her face.

"Must e'en now hie me back or have them come in search of me," she whispered. "Rest thee well, Ramon de Grandin. Thou'lt need refreshment 'gainst the morrow's work."

### 5. *Two Ride Forth Together*

THE gentle shaking troubled him. He was snugly comfortable beneath the wolfskin coverlet, and he had not known snug comfort in a long time. Also, his dreams had been most pleasant: of the gay court at Toulouse, of song contests and knightly jousts and tournaments and fair women with pale hands; and through them all, mingling with the happy visions of the times long lost, there ran the figure of a lissome damozel with night-black hair and moss-green eyes that brightened sometimes with the flashing fire of opals. "Begone, avault, aroint thee!" he complained, snuggling down

more deeply in the soft fur robes. But the shaking was repeated and, awake at last, and angry, he sat up in the corded bed.

"Let be!" he ordered curtly. "May not a man sleep peacefully—ha, is't thou, *ma bella?*" He broke his petulant complaint abruptly as Basta's face showed in the semi-darkness of the candlelight. "I crave thy pardon for such churlish words—"

"There is no time for courtesy, mesire," she interrupted in a whisper. "Arise and do thy harness on. We must away right quickly!" She dropped his clothing on the bed and laid a sword and dagger and a set of body armor by it. "The moon e'en now is fading in the sky and dawn is not far off. Count Otto and his men-wolves will return anon, and it were well we put as many miles of road as possible 'twixt them and us ere they discover our departure."

He caught her hand and kissed it as he saw his good Toledo blade once more within his reach. "By all the saints, hast given me new courage, *domna mia,*" he declared as he hastened to attire himself. "Is the castle then deserted while Otto quests his prey?"

"Nay, the entranceway is guarded, but by a handful only," she told him as they crept down the winding stair. "Some lie in swinish drunkenness, most range the hills with Otto, a few keep ward. It is for us to force our way through them. . . ."

He loosed his long sword in its sheath as they stepped warily into the base court and tiptoed toward the stable.

Basta had donned a page boy's livery and tucked her long hair in a velvet cap. High boots encased her slim straight legs and a sword hung by her side. Across her shoulder draped a pair of saddlebags and in her hand she held a flint and tinder box.

Swiftly they clapped saddles on two horses, his own and a Wallachian cog, short-legged and heavy-set, but an easy steed for woman's riding. "Await me here a moment," she directed as he led the horses from the stable. There was a click of steel on flint, and looking through the stable door he saw the fire-glow on her features as she blew the tinder into life. Then she stooped quickly, and in a moment came the curl of smoke and a soft crackling, as of eggshells trodden underfoot, that told him she had set the heaped-up stable straw afire.

They tarried till the ruddy orange red of leaping flames began to paint the gray stone with bright hues, then vaulted to the saddle and with a mighty shout of "Fire!" charged clattering across the courtyard.

The provost's men on guard about the gate rushed forward to dispute their passage, but the billowing clouds of smoke that burst and tumbled from the stable door made them loom dim and indistinct as phantoms in a fog, and the roar and crack of quickly mounting flames made the confusion greater. A warder aimed a pike thrust at de Grandin; he swept the partizan aside and thrust out savagely. The fellow fell back with a scream as steel crashed through his lips and teeth and tongue. An arbalest bolt came whining past them and struck the vault above their heads, and as another pikeman hurried up he trod upon the quarrel and went stumbling as it turned beneath his foot. Basta leant across her saddle-bow and thrust her sword into the sprawling varlet's spine, and de Grandin clove another to the eyes as their horses reached the outer gate.

No time to fold the great gate's leaves back. They thrust the postern's bar aside and, bending low upon their horses' necks, rode through the narrow opening. Then while he held the watchmen back

with darting point and flailing edge his partner in escape hacked at the hawsers which upheld the coulisse. The spike-toothed grating crashed behind them with a mighty bang as they fled down the causeway leading from the castle, and de Grandin turned and shook his fist back at the gloomy pile. "Trapped by Verigod!" he shouted. "The wolves are in the deadfall!" A shower of crossbow quarrels answered him, but all fell short, and he rocked with laughter as they rode away. With the portcullis down, its hawsers cut, the men within the castle were securely prisoned. They must run howling through their burning pen until the flames consumed them, as surely doomed to death by fire as if found guilty in the bishop's court and sentenced to be burnt for heresy and witchcraft.

They clattered down the mountainside through groves of evergreen and oak and out across the pleasant valley where the rising sun began already to shoot rosy darts and drive the clustering shadows back. Far off, in a sequestered franklin's cot, a cock crew with an elfin, silvery note. De Grandin sent a mocking "*coquerico*" echoing back and burst into a song:

*"Isot ma drue, isot ma mie!  
En vous ma mort, en vous ma vie!"*

Her rich contralto matched his lyric baritone:

*"Belle amie, ainsi va de nous!  
Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!"*

The horses drew together as the trailway narrowed, and he leant toward her and kissed her on the mouth. "*En vous ma mort, en vous ma vie!*" he quoted in a whisper.

"*Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!*" she answered, and her lips clung against his like iron to the lodestone.

## 6. The Wolf Pack Hunts Again

NIGHT was falling quickly. The sky's bright blue was stained to steel-gray, tawny, finally a dull slate, and presently the hard, cold moonlight crept between the branches of the trees as if to search the riders out, to say to something that pursued them: "Here they be!" No caw of rook or raven's croak came through the thick pine boughs, only the moaning of a wind that seemed to grow more cold each instant, and, occasionally, the crackle of a dry, dead leaf.

But was it just the crackling of dead leaves? About them, right and left, behind, before, marching with them, following, waiting for them, was a stealthy pad-pad-pad of tufted feet. It grew and multiplied till from every quarter it seemed closing in on them. Something streaked across the road before them like a flash of dancing light reflected from a mirror. A rabbit, flying with wings of terror on its heels. The rustling increased till it sounded like the slashing drive of hailstones on the dry-leaf carpet of the forest, and a deer shot by, running with the speed of desperation.

Basta's teeth were chattering. "This likes me not!" she whispered, drawing nearer to de Grandin.

He smoothed his restless horse's neck and wondered which particular saint to approach with a proposition. The Blessed Ones had never failed him yet, but this situation was unprecedented. Intermediate help was not to be despised, but in the circumstances it might be best to make direct petition. He bent his head and signed himself.

"*Dom Dio*, look on us," he whispered reverently. "We are very weak and full of sin, and oftentimes have transgressed Thy commandments. Nathless, Senhor Lord, we are very sorry for our misdeeds, and if it be Thy will to save us from the

perils that encompass us, we promise to amend our ways as far as in our sinful nature lies. Grant, therefore, that we may come safely through this danger—or if it be that we must perish, let us take such toll of those who came against us that their children and their children's children shall turn pale and tremble when our names are spoken. Amen.

"Now let what is to come come quickly," he looked up smilingly from his devotions. "Sweet mistress, no man dies more times than one, and who would wish to live always?"

They had ridden out into a little clearing and the stars were twinkling infinitely remote and chill above them. Far off, but bell-like nearer, even as it sounded, came the howling of a wolf, and its quavering wail was answered by another, and another—and another. On every side, completely circling them, rose the hunting-cry, and suddenly a gray form glided from the shadows, followed by two more, three, a score, and they found themselves the center of a ring of greenly gleaming eyes, white teeth and hairy breasts. The howling had ceased now, but the silence that enfolded them was infinitely more frightening. Standing head and shoulders above others in the pack, a gigantic wolf wove through the hairy circle, seeming to give orders and plan strategy.

De Grandin slipped down from his saddle, for his horse was mad with terror and unmanageable. He held his hand to Basta, helping her alight, and as she dropped beside him clipped her to his breast. "One kiss before we meet them steel to tusk, *querida*," he whispered as they took their stand against a lightning-blasted pine. "If so be we must die and the Lord wills I must rot in hell for ever, the memory of thy kisses will console me in the midst of fire and brimstone everlasting."

"Again!" she pleaded. "Again!" She

wound her arms about him and strained herself so tight against his armor that it seemed their two forms would be merged in one. "Oh, beloved, why must we stop to breathe?"

But need to stop was urgent, for even as they embraced the pack charged. A leaping chaos of red mouths and flashing teeth surged on them, and into it he plunged his sword with lightning strokes, stabbing, slashing, hacking till his arm grew numb with killing.

He saw Basta fighting like a thing possessed; then suddenly he heard her give a cry and fall down writhing as two wolves leaped on her.

But it did not seem as if they bore her down. Rather, it appeared she went down voluntarily, and while she stabbed and slashed at her assailants with her dagger her right hand dropped the sword and reached out for an odd-shaped fungus growing like a mushroom between two branches of the dead tree's rotting roots. Her fingers closed upon it and she thrust it in her mouth.

"Perhaps that way is best," he murmured as he wrenched his sword-blade from a cloven skull and thrust it through the brisket of a leaping wolf. "Death cannot be far off, and if the poison fungus kills her quickly she will not feel the agony of being torn to pieces—ha, would'st thou, by the sandals of Saint Bride?"—this to a wolf which clamped its teeth upon his sword arm and sought to drag him down. "Taste this and see how well it likes thy belly!" He drove his dagger in the creature's throat and turned the blade so that the red blood spurted out like wine from a burst cask.

Basta had rolled upon her back and four shaggy beasts were on her, tearing at her gorget and breast armor.

De Grandin started toward her, hewing out a lane for passage with his sword, but the mighty leader of the pack leaped

on him, and he fell beneath the impact of the monster's driven weight.

Now the other wolves drew back and the frenzied yelping ceased. The leader was about to make his kill.

A thousand times de Grandin had looked straight-eyed in the skull-faced countenance of death, and always he had grinned at it. But now he did not grin. The snarling face above him was a wolf's, the fur was wolfish and the fangs were bestial, but through the beastly lineaments he recognized the face of Otto Wolfberg. His stomach retched with loathing as the grinning mouth drew near his throat. In a moment he would feel the sharp teeth tearing through his flesh, and he was powerless, for the man-wolf crouched upon him, holding down his legs with his back legs, pinioning his arms against the earth with his forepaws. "*Mater salvatoris,*" he besought, "comes now a sinful soul. Pray thou for it——"

His panted prayer was interrupted by a wild, fierce cry the like of which he'd never heard. Not quite a roar nor yet a scream, but blending the most fearsome part of each, it echoed and re-echoed through the werewolf-haunted wood.

The wolves heard it and were afraid. For the first time in their savage, man-beast lives they knew the paralyzing gripe of sheer, stark terror. And even as they turned in fright they knew the realization of their fear, for, apparently from nowhere, a dreadful thing was in their midst. It was a creature like a catamount, but four times larger, with rippling soot-black fur and flashing eyes of green, and teeth like simitars and claws like sabers. It rushed among them, spreading death so swift it might have been a lightning bolt. At a single blow from its great paw a wolf lay belly-down with twitching legs and whimpering breath, its back snapped like a rotten twig; a sweep of its sword-studded talons, and skin and

flesh and pelage ripped away from staring bones. The creature seized a great wolf in its jaws and shook it as a cat might shake a mouse, then tossed the carcass by contemptuously and struck two more beasts from its path as it made for the wolf-thing that worried at de Grandin's throat. Then with a roar it sprang.

The wolf-man turned to flee. The great cat-monster held its stroke and watched him till he almost reached the tangle of the undergrowth, then leaped in a long arc and seized his flanks between its claws, dragging him to earth as though it were a tabby, he a luckless rat.

Then began a dreadful parody of cat-and-mouse play. The werewolf trailed a broken leg behind him, for the panther's mighty jaws had crushed his bones at its first onset, and at each fresh capture the black leopard gave him further hurt, now raking him from huckle-bone to rump, now clawing him across the shoulders, now wallowing him upon the frozen ground and slapping at him soft-clawed till the breath was almost beaten from his body. Then it would crouch, its tail atwilt, and watch him with inscrutable green eyes as he limped off to seek the shelter of a thicket, only to leap and drag him back each time he almost reached asylum.

It seemed a metamorphosis was working in the werewolf. When first the panther's torturing play began he was as much in form a wolf as any natural beast, but as cruel claws and ruthless fangs ripped quivering flesh from his tormented bones he seemed to take on semi-human shape. His paws appeared to lengthen into hands, his shoulders widened and his body straightened, so that while he was still cased in unkempt, matted fur, he was more like a man dight in a hairy garment than a wolf. And from the tortured mask of fur the terror-stricken features of von Wolfberg looked in hopeless fright.

Now the wolf-man found the semblance of a human voice. "Mercy!" he croaked hoarsely. "Have pity on my misery! Castle, followers, chattels, heritage, are all gone. Grant me but the boon of life! Let me drag my broken body to some sanctuary where I may repent my sins!"

Repentance! He had full measure of it now as the great panther sported with him. Otto of the Wolves' Hill, twelfth werewolf of his line, robber and tormenter of the helpless, now knew the pangs of torture. He who never yet had granted mercy to a man or child or woman prayed in vain for mercy. Craven at the last, he offered no resistance to the claws that ripped his shuddering flesh or the strong teeth that crushed his bones, but screamed and squealed and pled for pity more abjectly than the weakest victim of his wolf-lust ever begged.

At last the catamountain wearied of its play. It struck von Wolfberg's head with a great paw, then as he reeled in dizziness beneath the blow, seized his neck between its teeth and shook him till he hung limp as an empty glove.

De Grandin watched the pantomime of vengeance to its end. Around him on the turf there lay a ring of werewolves, some gasping out their lives with wheezing breath, some beginning to assume their human shapes, now that the spell of evil magic had been ended with their evil lives; all were smeared with blood and scarred with gaping wounds. Crouched on the lifeless form of Otto Wolfberg the great panther stared at him with green unwinking eyes. "*Mo' Dio, Domna Cat,*" he complimented, "had thought myself a valiant dealer-out of death to evil-doers, but I must yield to thee. I know not who thou art nor whence thou comest, but I am very much beholden to thee."

The catamountain rose from Wolf-

berg's body, arched its back and stalked majestically into the wood.

"O Basta, my beloved, why could'st thou not have waited for a little?" moaned de Grandin. "Thou wotted not that succor was so near when——" He kicked a stiffening carcass from his way and bent to seek for Basta's body underneath a mound of furry corpses.

She was not there. His search grew frantic. Here and there, wherever corpses lay in groups, he hurried in his quest. "Basta! Basta!" he cried piteously. "O saints, grant I may find her!"

He heard a rustling in the pine copse at the clearing's rim. Perhaps she lived; perhaps she'd dragged herself into the underbrush to die. . . .

He forced the evergreens aside and halted with a gasp of sheer amazement. Seated cross-legged on the ground, Basta wove the tresses of her hair in plaits and bound them round her head.

#### 7. "*We Be Fortune's Fools!*"

"**F**ANTINA—*novia!*" he called, his eyes almost incredulous with happiness. "Is't truly thou, my love? Thou art not dead? Count Otto and his monstrous minions are no more, pursuit is at an end—the road lies open to our feet!" He bent to seize her in his arms, but she pushed him gently back.

"Unclean!" she warned. "Lay not your hand on me. I am unfit for Christian touch!"

"Who says it?" he demanded. "Who dares say that the flower——"

"The flower!" she burst in. "Aye, thou sayest—the flower! I sold my soul for vengeance. Now I pay the price, e'en though it breaks my heart in twain." The sudden unexpected laugh that broke her words clanged hard as coins rung on a money-changer's table. "Who cares?" she challenged. "Who cares what happens to

the soul of a slave-wench? Her body is the property of any two-legged beast that claims it; why should not Sathanas have her soul?"

"Nay, Basta, hear me," he entreated. "I jested not when I declared my love——"

"Let be!" her voice was thin drawn to the breaking-point. She dipped her hand into the pocket hanging from her girdle. "An thou'lt accept a gift from one whose soul is forfeit, take these in parting." She let a cataract of jewels flash through her fingers to the earth. "Yesternight thou named thyself a landless fugitive. These be the pick of Otto Wolfberg's treasure. I took them ere we fled. Take them with thee to rebuild thy fortunes; 'tis the ransom of a king——"

"What talk is this of parting?" he demanded. "Have I not said I love thee? Come, come thy ways, my love. The road is open to our feet, and there is none to say us nay. I know not where the nearest town may be, but sure there is a priest there who will——"

Her gesture halted him. "I am become as one of them," she told him, pointing to the clearing where the dead and dying werewolves lay.

"Sayest thou?"

"Indeed. Bethink thee: Upon the night we met I told thee that I sought a flower. It is a bloom of hell, and whose eats of it straight shifts his shape into the beast he most resembles. Thereafter for three twelvemonths he must live in bestial form, with only little intervals of human shape. I found the flower not when I first sought it, but e'en now when the wolf-men came on us I saw it growing at my very feet. I knew the price required, but I paid it willingly that Otto Wolfberg and his followers might be destroyed. Farewell, my love, my heart, my very dearest . . ." Her voice broke on a choking note, as if her throat were

stopped with sobs, and she dropped to hands and knees as if she sought some lost thing in the leaves.

"Basta, *carissima*," he cried, "it boots not what your outward form may be, if so be that your heart inclines to me——"

Like one who flees quick death she scurried on all fours into the bracken. There was a thrashing in the conifers. Then the branches parted. A great black panther looked at him with moss-green eyes. For a long moment it stood there, regarding him unwinkingly. Then it turned and padded silently away into the whispering wood.

HE STOOPED and took a palmful from the pile of gems that glittered at his feet and let them trickle slowly through his outspread fingers. Emeralds . . . rubies . . . pearls.

Emeralds for the green of eyes that looked into his heart, rubies for her vivid lips, pearls for the white skin of her.

Rubies, pearls and emeralds. The ransom of a king she'd named them, soothingly. With such gems as these he could buy houses, lands and goods and live like any lord. The King of Sicily offered refuge to the fleeing Provençals. He could live richly there for a long lifetime and not expend the tithe of that which glittered in his palm.

Yes, he could live wrapped in the arms of luxury. But his own arms would be empty.

One look he cast into the thicket where the panther disappeared, then raised his shoulders in a shrug. The Moorish sages had the right of it. No man could overcome his fate.

"Aye, we be Fortune's fools, we two," he murmured as he turned to seek his horse.

Untouched, the little pyramid of gems glowed like a fallen star against the brown leaf-mold.