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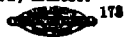
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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF THE MONTH**



"Meantime, Messire the Devil, you shall pay through the nose."

# The Golden Spider

By SEABURY QUINN

*Fourchette made a compact with the arch fiend himself, but whoever  
sups with the Devil must have a long spoon*

## 1. How Knots Grow in a Soul

**F**OURCHETTE sat spinning in the sun before the cabin door. It was a poor house, built of mud and wattles, with gaps and cracks in its walls

through which winter winds and summer tempests came at will, but it was hers and Jacques'; at night the firelight heartened it, and there were dusky corners where her dreams could find a lodgment.

Fourchette was happy. Contentment

shone in her eyes like a candle's glow reflected through a screen, and her little triangular face framed in its shock of saffron-yellow hair was like a flower set upon a tall slim stalk; for her kirtle of coarse linen was bright green, and fitted her slim-waisted, narrow-hipped young body as a wheat-husk fits the grain. Under her left arm the distaff rested, the spindle-stone twirled merrily beneath the agile practised fingers of her right hand as she paid the combed fleece from its skein and twisted it into an ever-lengthening cord of crewel. From where she sat she could look clear across their little croft and over to the wide domains of the seigneur where, beyond the patch of forest land where spotted deer could sometimes be seen in the shadows, her Jacques was laboring in the field to pay their quit-rent to the lord.

Her Jacques! A serf and villein in the lord's field and the castle base court, by her side he was a king. For him she saved the best their meager board afforded, the crustiest of the bread, the richest, fullest piece of honeycomb, the breast of fowl when they ate meat on holidays and high feast days. They had been wed almost a twelvemonth, she and Jacques, and before their wedding they had passed almost five years in courtship, working, saving, scrimping to amass the necessary silver angel with which to buy their right to marry free from the lord's bride-bed privilege; now they were on their way to being solid farmerers. They were not rich enough to keep a cow, but already they had several sheep, and three lambs graced their flock. A she-goat with a little scampering kid and a bold, strutting cock who led a harem of six speckled hens, together with a hive of bees, completed their livestock, and close beside the dooryard was a little patch of pasture land and a field of ripening wheat. They had been bold to plant a crop so long in growing, for who could say what moment raiders would come riding down among

them, trampling down their growing grain and robbing them of any chance of garnering it? Yet *le bon Dieu* had been good to them, their corn was ripening in the sun, their flocks were multiplying, their quit-rent would surely be paid. Next year, perhaps, they could afford a bench and some stools, and after that a cow, or even two, take up another hide of land; then, if the sweet Lord willed it so, there would be children, pretty daughters and strong sons to make their little house into a home and strengthen their declining years.

The clatter of shod hooves against the stony roadway leading to the height on which the feudal castle stood broke through the snatch of song she hummed. Gay in velvet doublets and high boots of Spanish leather, with their long sword-scabbards clinking on the rowels at their heels they came, and Fourchette's blue eyes brightened. What woman since the world began has ever seen the glittering array of martial panoply without a quickening of the pulses? She recognized most of the company, Sir Giulio du Lac, bronze-bearded, copper-haired and smiling, a gentle chevalier who sat above the salt at the seigneur's table; Messire Osmond and Messire Pindare, esquires almost ready to receive the accolade and golden spurs of knighthood; Marcellin and Hyacinthe and Fabien, adolescent pages nearing squirehood, forward, brash and pugnacious as young cockerels whose spurs had just begun to sprout. Besides them were several other gentle lads and young men, all brave in forest-green and gold embroidery, and laughing hugely at some merry quip which one of them had made.

Fetlock-deep they splashed into the purling waters of the little brook that ran between the sown land and the pasture plot of Jacques' small croft, and one of them burst into song:

*Nicolette o le gent cors,  
Por vous sui venuz en bor . . .*

"*Grand Dieu!*" the singer broke his song and tightened rein as he reached the brook bank. "What have we here? By sainted Denis his head, 'tis a pretty chit!" The bright, hot blood rose like a tide through Fourchette's throat and cheeks and mounted to her brow, for she was suddenly the focal point for twenty dancing, merry eyes.

It was Pindare who spoke, the brown-eyed, black-haired, olive-skinned Messire Pindare who had come from Outremer to serve his squireship with Raymond de la Montagne, lord proprietor and seigneur of the estate to whose soil Fourchette and Jacques were nailed as serfs. Now, as he rode his horse across the little garden-plot of ripening corn, his eyes were shining with combined amusement and anticipation.

"Nay, little mistress, be not frightful," he soothed as he drew rein in the dooryard and slipped down from the saddle with a merry clink of sword on spur. "We do but crave a dish of sweet, cool milk from your fair hand. Put by distaff and spindle and bring us drink, I beseech thee."

"Nay, Messire — milord — your worship," Fourchette dropped a frightened curtsy, "we have but one jug of milk. The mother goat gives but a little, and the kid is ever hungry——"

"Say you so, in God's truth?" Pindare interrupted. "Why, then, 'tis easy to increase thy supply and give thee fresh meat at the same time." With the slightly grating hiss of metal scratching metal his sword flashed from its scabbard, and in two strides he had stepped across the dooryard to the goat which nursed her wobbly-legged baby, seized the kid by a hind leg, and struck its head off with a single quick blow.

"*Ohé, la pauvre!*" screamed Fourchette as the headless little carcass twitched and quivered on the hard-packed earth. "My

little one, my poor one, my sweet innocent!"

WITH an outraged bleat the mother goat whirled round upon the murderer of her offspring, drew her hooves together and launched herself like a small thunderbolt. Taken by surprise, Pindare went down before the furious onslaught, attempted to get up and sprawled again beneath the impact of the maddened goat's wild charge.

"*Bravo, Mamman Chèvre!*"

"*Encore*—to the attack again!"

"A golden leopard Pindare flees!"

"Taken, and another that he wins the joust!"

Laughing, shouting, wagering, his companions made a ring around Pindare and the goat while Fourchette knelt upon her doorstep with her hands pressed to her mouth to stop her unavailing screams. The kid, the increase of their flock, was gone, and now the mother—the agonized, half screamed, half moaning cry of the goat drowned the men's wild shoutings. Pindare had gained his feet and as the goat charged at him hewed her forelegs off at the knees. Now he leaped upon the crippled beast with iron-studded boots, staving in her ribs before he finished her with a slash of his blade.

The circle opened to permit the victor's exit, and the squire held his bloodied sword out to Fourchette. "Wipe me clean this blade, wench," he commanded, "then bring us drink. We have already tarried overlong at thy hovel."

She dried the sword upon her gown and handed it back to Pindare, then weeping, went to fetch the crook of goat's milk from the spring.

From lip to lip the beaker passed until it came to Fabien, the youngest of the pages. Raising it, he pledged the company:

"To your health, *Messires!*" drained

it, then dashed it on the ground so that it broke into a dozen fragments.

"Messire!" in desperation Fourchette dropped to her knees at Sir Giulio's feet, "bid them be tender with our things, I prithe! We be good and lawful tenants of our lord the seigneur, our rent is paid upon the term-day, and all is given him which lawfully is his. Are we not entitled to protection in return?"

His laughing gray eyes looked into her tear-filled blue ones. They were high-spirited, these lads; it was pleasant to observe their harmless pranks. "So much is bound to be paid to the seigneur as of right," he answered, speaking slowly, as to a dull child, "but he may take the rest too, if he likes. You are serfs of the body, you and your husband; you and all you have are his, and may be taken for his use and pleasure, or the use and pleasure of his servants. These be retainers of the seigneur, woman. They do but exercise his right of prehension in his absence and by his leave."

Two of the pages seized her underneath the arms, raised her to her feet and urged her, half running, half falling, to the hut. They paused a moment, kicked the door back, thrust her across the threshold.

## 2. *Ad Diabolum*

FOURCHETTE knelt by her bed. Her fresh green gown was torn almost to tatters and soiled until it looked like a pot-rag; her long bright hair poured round her face and spilled in a bright pool upon the cabin's earthen floor. Her arms were stretched across the broken bed, her fingers interlaced. Tears were rolling in big, slow drops down her cheeks. She did not sob or move in any way; she just knelt there, as still as if she were a carved figure of repentant Magdalene. Once or twice a heavy, hard breath rasped between her teeth, but it was neither sob nor moan, only the instinctive sighing of a body in which the

soul has been crushed. Her world was broken into fragments as irrevocably as the pitcher which the thoughtless page had smashed; their little patch of corn was trampled in the earth, their goat was gone, their kid was gone, their house dishonored . . . and she . . .

Wearily she raised herself, holding to the broken bed for support. A mile away the river bawled and shouted through a gully set with saw-toothed rocks. There was her goal and destiny; no other refuge offered, there was no other place for such as she. She took a step and almost fell prone on her face; her tortured, fragile limbs could scarce support the dreadful burden lodged within her breast. Strange that a broken heart could so outweigh a whole one.

"*Adieu, mon Jacques,*" she murmured as she took a second painful step, "for this world and the next and all eternity——"

"And are you really bent on self-destruction, little pretty Mistress? Nay, 'twere a foolish thing to do so soon!" Softly, scarcely louder than the sougning of the breeze across the wheat fields, the words came to her, seemingly from just before her faltering feet.

She glanced down. There he stood, a small figure, no taller than a hand's-span, with long hooked nose and goggle eyes, hunched back, protruding chest. Dressed all in brilliant red he was, from tiny pointed shoon to little curve-peaked cap, for all the world an animate replica of the puppet Punchinello she had seen a troupe of jongleurs from Italy present in their play of *Pontius cum Judacis* at the carnival last Shrove Tuesday. But she recognized him, a *follet*—one of the small goblin-folk of whom her mother and her grandmother had whispered tales; little people who invested fields and forests, coming into human dwellings only stealthily at night, sometimes to bring a boon of money or help the housewife with her work, some-

times, if they were not made welcome, to wreak mischief on their hosts. Harmless little folk they were, not always truly good, but very seldom really bad. The gracious kindly God must tolerate them. She had heard of them since infancy, but never had she seen one, and now she was afraid—terribly afraid. The parish priest had warned her of them. They were truly demons, emissaries of the Arch Fiend's self, bound by a righteous sentence to live until the Day of Judgment, then to be cast with Lucifer the Proud into a lake of everlasting seething brimstone. Meanwhile, anyone who trafficked with them or even failed to drive them off with prayers and invocations to the saints was guilty of a mortal sin; more, whoever saw a spirit would forthwith be stricken dead, or blinded, at the very least.

And so she was afraid. Her small teeth ground together, her insides seemed contracting in upon themselves, her breath was still, every nerve and muscle in her body was as taut as a lute-string while she stood waiting for his next word.

Nor was it slow in coming. "Is there nothing you could ask of life, small mistress mine, no wish which you could name, that you are resolved to quit the good green earth thus suddenly?"

Outraged anger burned the welling tears from Fourchette's eyes. "Aye, that there is, three things, i' sooth, but what can I, a serf and serf's wife, do to gain them?"

"Mayhap," the little fellow wagged his small ungainly head, "mayhap I can accomplish them for you, my little pretty one."

Fourchette remembered tales they told of Claude the miller's son's grandsire. Like Jacques and her he had been but a self-plowman, and like them he had struggled against poverty, want and privation. His crops were filched, his house was wrecked, his only daughter carried off, all "for the service of the seigneur." Then one day

as he toiled behind the plow he cried in bitterness of heart, "Oh, if the clod I turn would only show a treasure underneath, enough for us to buy our freedom! The carven saints look on in stony silence when we make our plaint to them; if only the kind Devil——"

From underneath the very clod his plow-share grated through a little man all dight in red rose suddenly, and standing in the furrow asked, "What would you of me, then?"

And straightway, when the plowman told him of his plight the little Red One pointed to the earth, and there the poor serf saw an earthen pot which when he tore its cover off proved to be full of coins, not brass, as were the few groats which the villein saw on rare occasions, not silver such as merchants clinked upon their bancals at the city fairs, but broad gold pieces minted with the signum of St. Louis, enough to buy their freedom from all quit-rents from that day, and with sufficient left to buy the water-mill on which the grandsire and his son and grandson lived in ease and luxury ever since. Folk said that at the end old Claude was snatched alive to hell by a great, fearsome fiend, and that his son died screaming pleas for mercy from a host of demons, seen by him alone, that hunched in deadly menace round his sick-bed. But did not the priests declare that many should be called but few be chosen for salvation? What if one were among the host of the rejected already? Did not old Claude choose wisely? Damned though he was for all eternity, at least he had had ease and comfort in this world, and so did his son after him. Perchance he would have been damned anyway, and if he had rejected the fiend's offer——

THE still, frail voice of the small red-clad man came to her, as from a great distance. "What would you give, my lit-

tle, fair Fourchette, if I could promise you the three things which you crave: revenge on those who have so spitefully entreated you, honor for you and affluence for yourself and husband—behold him, how he toils and moils from sunup to sundown, yet makes no progress. Today the great folk from the château trampled his small patch of garden, killed his milch goat and his kid, broke his cwer and used you for a plaything. How will he pay the quit-rent when it falls due? How will he feed you and himself? He can no more. He and you must die of very poverty unless——”

The little voice stopped, but the small topheavy head wagged at her, and the tiny, ugly face smiled knowingly. “We can save him, you and I. We can make him great and powerful, a man feared and respected; we can make you powerful, so that all who displease you shall bite the earth, so that all folk, from the smallest to the greatest, shall fear you. What would you give in return for these things, my little pretty mistress?”

“What can I give—what have I? Our little store of wealth is gone; my body is a shame and a reproach to me; my soul—alas, my soul is burned to ashes in my breast!”

“Nay, little mistress, say not so. Truly, your soul is a small thing, of little worth to you, of none at all to God, else He had not let such things befall you; but to me it is a pretty trinket. Come, give it me, and all that I have named shall be yours, aye, and more too. I will give you things which in your simple innocence you have not conceived of.”

“But, little man, you are so wee——”

“Give that which I do crave of you, and you shall see me grow unto my rightful stature. Are you content? Is it a bargain?”

Despite her misery she smiled. This little Puckish fellow, this Hop-o'-my-

Thumb whom she could cover with her cupped hand as with a tent . . .

“Great sir, if you will make these gifts to me I am your servant for all time. You shall be my master and my God, and I shall have none other. Gracious to me shall be the light of your countenance, and all your services sweet duties of delight.”

“Then down upon the earth and do me reverence. Pledge me your soul for all time and eternity; vow yourself to my service without let or restraint!” The voice of command grew and swelled. Like the diapason of a mighty organ when the stops are opened and the force or harmony turned forth without restraint, it swept through the small, darkened hut until it shook the mud-daubed walls and seemed to raise the rush-thatched roof.

And as the voice enhanced so did the speaker. Like a shadow lengthening in the evening when the sun slants down behind the shoulders of the mountains he magnified until he was as great as a man, an ox, a war-horse—until his head pressed on the ridgepole of the roof and his shoulders hid the wall from sight. Nor was he now the little comic PUNCHINELLO with hunched back and ugly good-humored countenance, but a tall and august presence, garbed in red, with a close-fitting coif from which his face looked forth in solemn, awful majesty, unsmiling, but not cruel; sad, but more thoughtful than morose; arrogant and proud, but with a certain look of understanding and compassion in it.

As the awe-inspiring change went forward Fourchette dropped upon her face, and with forehead pressed against the cabin's earthen floor adored him, groveling. She did him homage in accordance with the Templars' rite, naming him her prince, her master and her lord.

He bent and breathed upon her, and his breath was like the rushing of a mighty wind. It burned her like a fire and froze

her like a raging winter tempest at the same time.

She would have shrieked aloud at the agony of it, but her throat was stopped, her tongue was paralyzed; she could neither scream nor speak nor move.

Then, quickly as it came, the torment passed away. She was lying prone upon the cabin floor, alone. There was neither giant fiend nor tiny brownie with her. All was as it had been when she rose to throw herself into the river.

But was it? She glanced toward the bed. It had been broken by the squires' and pages' rowdy play. Now it was whole and sound . . . or had it really been crushed? Her green gown showed no rents, no stains. From the dooryard came a quick, impatient bleat. She ran stumbling from the cabin, and saw before the door the she-goat with the kid beneath her, nursing greedily, its small tail wagging like a reed blown by the wind. Scarcely crediting her senses she rushed to the spring. Safe, whole, and filled with curdling milk the pitcher stood in the cool, limpid water. The corn waved in the rising evening breeze. There were no tracks of wanton horses in it.

Fourchette fell on her knees and joined her hands in thanksgiving. It had been a dream, a hideous nightmare. Sir Giulio and his squires and pages had not ridden by, the goat and kid were sound and well, she had not suffered indignity, her soul was still her own. "Praise be to Thee, most gracious, gentle, loving—" she began, and stopped upon the word. She could not call the name of God, however hard she sought to frame it.

### 3. *Satan Makes a Payment*

PRESENTLY came Jacques home from the field of labor, his face all pale despite his haste, his breath a rasping whistle in his throat, his clumsy wooden

sabots clattering on the flints of the pathway.

"Fourchette!" he called, all out of breath so he could scarcely find the power to cry her name. "Fourchette, my little one, my babe, my treasure, are you truly here, and safe?"

She came out to meet him from the cabin, white arms outstretched, bright hair agleam, her eyes alight with joy at his return. "Yea, husband mine, my love, my life, my all," she answered him, "why should I not be here and safe? Know you not I have a mighty champion and protector?"

"Oh, aye," he replied as he gathered her into his arms, "the blessed saints watch over us, but sometimes meseems they nod in their vigil. Guillaume the cotter's wife was set upon by gallants from the seigneurie this afternoon, and so abused that she lies at death's door. His little garden patch was trampled underfoot, his kid and milch-goat slain, and his stone ewer broken by a sportive page. They told me that another party of the gay young gentlemen had come this way . . . oh, Fourchette mine, my heart has been a stone within my breast all day since I heard that. Thou art my love, my life, my breath, my heart's-blood and the light of mine eyes. . . ."

He drew her to him, holding her in his embrace as the dusk enfolds the fruit it guards, and she, her head upon his shoulder, murmured soft, meaningless words, the kind of words women have used since time began for comforting their children—or their men.

FROM the great tower of the château on the hill a bell boomed sonorously, slowly, solemnly, as though it paused to catch its breath and sob with grief between each stroke. One—two—three—nine times its brazen throat cried out its peal of sorrow; a long pause, then another ninefold



chant of woe. Nine tolls marked a man—and ten times nine the passing bell had tolled before the little cavalcade splashed through the brook and mounted the steep roadway leading to the castle, torchlight reddening the harness of the men-at-arms and casting fearful, creeping shadows on the grassed land by the roadway.

Jacques ran down to the water-ford and hailed a varlet who led a pack animal. The load the beast bore was wrapped round in a long winding-sheet of linen, and through the whiteness of the fabric showed the stain of fresh-spilt blood. "What passes, Héraclide?" he called.

"Alas, it is the good Sir Giulio de Lac, and Messires Ormond and Pindare—they and their company of seven other pages and esquires were set upon by the thrice-cursed Patrinonnes as they rode through the wildwood, and cut down to a man. May God have pity on their souls, and on the souls of all good Christians!"

"Amen," responded Jacques, and signed himself with the Cross.

Jacques was long at his devotions that night, giving thanks that he and his had been spared the cruel fate of Guillaume the cotter and his wife, thanks that his humble home still stood intact, especially that he still had Fourchette in her beauty and sweet innocence.

Her prayer was brief but heartfelt as she knelt beside the crude bedstead before she crept between the coarse flax sheets and into Jacques' embrace: "*Tenez, Messire le Diable*, if so be we have made a pact I thank thee for the earnest-money thou hast paid. Thy full requital on thy bond shall be made when thou makest demand. Meantime, thou shalt pay through the nose. Amen."

#### 4. *Wealth, Health and Happiness*

CONSTERNATION reigned throughout the Pays de la Montagne; the seigneur had declared his quit-rents must

be paid in money, not in kind. Never in the memory of a living man had such a thing been asked, for to the wretched serfs who tilled the fields and worked the roads, drew water and hewed wood one day—and sometimes two—in every three in their lord's service the sight of a brass farthing was rarer than a glimpse at a blue moon. Many passed their whole lives without ever handling a coin. How should they obtain cash now to meet their lord's demands? Geese, hens, sheep, goats and even cows were driven to the town for sale, the peasants stripped their poor homes of the barest rudiments of comfort to raise the pelf for their quit-rents.

Jacques was in despair. All year he'd toiled to save enough to buy two stools and a bancal for their home. Now not only must he toss this little hoard of copper on the checkered table of the seigneur's steward, the sheep must go to the money-changers, and the goat and kid as well; perhaps also their little brood of chickens and their hive of bees. Then wherewith should they feed themselves when icy winter came?

Fourchette smiled confidently. "He who watches over us will surely see we are not left in desolation," she encouraged. And when he asked her how it was she put such faith in the saints who maugre prayers and entreaties had made no move to help Guillaume the cotter's wife when she was sore beset, she only smiled the more and kissed him and replied, "You will see!"

And see they did. One week before the rent fell due, as Jacques was laboring in the field his mattock clinked on metal as he struck it in the earth, and there before his startled eyes was a small iron casket, brimful of silver angels; enough to pay his quit-rents for a five-year term, with something over to lend poor Guillaume the cotter, who had nothing left to put in pawn to raise the rent the lord demanded.

Their fortunes grew apace. Fourchette went to the market town each handsel day, at first with a few eggs and a cast of wheaten bread in a small wicker hanaper, later with a flock of chickens and a pile of fresh-spun woolen yarn, and always the best trade was hers. Buyers seemed to come to her instinctively and she sold at any price she chose to ask, nor was there any bickering.

When Jean the cobbler, long collector of the seigneur's moneys from the peasants, was caught red-handed in a defalcation and summarily hanged by the neck, the seigneur cast about for his successor, and elected Jacques to sit beneath the feudal tree each Saturday and settle accounts with the little folk. Surely, reasoned Sire Raymond, a man who can lay by a store of sixteen silver angels in a single year, and on a daily wage of nothing, would be the very one to squeeze the last groat from the farmerers and crofters.

Fourchette's heart swelled with pride. Her Jacques, but yesterday a grubber in the fields, was now a little lord in his own right, sitting—sometimes harshly—in judgment upon the very men who aforetime had looked down on him because he had but a few sheep and some goats while they had cows and even horses in their stables.

But they were lonely in their new grandeur. The neighbors louted low to them when they passed by, but they were avoided and shunned. At first they felt a thrill of pride at this, but soon the isolation of their station saddened them. The castle gentry scorned and hated them, especially Fourchette. Somehow the story of the visit of Sir Giulio and the squires and pages to her house—and the fate that overtook them afterward—leaked out, and while they feared to offend her lest misfortune strike them, too, they named her witch and devil's-mistress in private. Their former gossips held no traffic with them—

when has the tax-collector ever had a friend? Their only safety lay in the lord's favor, and this was measured strictly by the money they leached from the peasants for him. So, between the hatred of the serfs and suspicion of the gentry they lived hemmed in by dangers in the midst of awful loneliness.

### 5. *Three Golden Hairs—Three Hundred Golden Leopards*

"**I** TELL thee, man, thou must raise it!" Sire Raymond de la Montagne glowered at the cowering Jacques. "Silver will no longer serve, I must have gold, two hundred golden leopards, and by this day fortnight." Sire Raymond meant to make a brave show when he joined the King to drive the English back into the sea. He must have fine weapons from Damasco, horses of pure Arab blood, arms and armor for his men-at-arms and a silk tent for his own use when camp was made. Such luxuries were not to be had in all France, but they could be bought in Outremer by those who had the price, and for the price he needed gold, not silver.

"But, good my lord," the wretched Jacques pleaded, "where am I to find gold? Have I an army which can raid it from the Flemish cities—where am I to dig the earth to find its treasures?"

Sire Raymond looked at him, and there was little friendship in his glance. "See thou to it," he replied. "Mayhap the place where you found silver to pay five years' quit-rent in advance will yield another hoard. But comes it from the peasantry or Jews, or from the Devil's coffers, I will have the sum of two hundred gold leopards, or"—he glanced up at the battlements—"you see yon embrasure? The rope you may not see, but it is ready. Lay in my hand two hundred golden leopards ere the fortnight passes, or by'r Lady thou shalt dangle out of one at the other's end.

Make thy choice and go thy ways, my Jacques."

**A** BARBANEL the banker squatted on the floor of his counting-house. His cap was jammed awry upon his head, covering one ear, leaving a patch of white hairless scalp exposed upon the other side; his gabardine was ripped to tatters, his plaited gray beard stained with blood. When he put trembling hands up to his cheeks as he rocked to and fro, blood welled from crushed fingertips. "*Oi!*" he murmured miserably. "*Oi, oi, oi!*"

A knocking at the door aroused him for a moment, but he sank back, keening, on his haunches as the portal swung back and a woman entered. With rheumy, lack-luster eyes he looked at her. From crown to heel she was enveloped in a hooded cloak of rough green stuff; he could not say if she were young or old, base-born or noble, he knew only that from the shadow of her updrawn camic her eyes burned at him like twin points of blue flame, and that something feverish had seemed to come into the room with her.

He felt a sudden fear. Two hours since the armed men of the count had gone away, but—the chilly little fireless room seemed stifling with a sudden heat—even their rough cruelty had been less frightening than this woman who stood glare-eyed like Medea of the heathen fable. . . . "What would ye of me, Lady?"

"Two hundred golden leopards, upon such usury as you may name!"

"Two hundred leopards!" He looked at her in dismay. "How should I have so much, or even one-tenth of it? Behold my empty, bleeding gums. The soldiers of the count have just been here, and jerked my teeth out one by one to force me to disclose the hiding-place of my gold—*oi!* See my maimed hands. They laid my fingertips between hewn boards and jumped on them until the blood burst forth as it

had been tears shed from grieving eyes, but . . . think ye I could have withstood such torment if I had a store of hidden gold to buy them off?"

"Yea, that do I," she answered simply. "I know your breed, good Jew; I know that only in the might of gold can you and yours find protection. I know full well that rather than consign your wife and children to a life of penury you would let them tear you limb from shuddering limb with red-hot pincers, and keep silent."

She let the capote of her cloak fall back, and down around her shoulders spilled a cataract of what seemed minted gold, so bright and yellow was her hair. "Behold, good usurer, if you will let me have the loan I crave, I'll pay you back with interest of a half-part, and"—the glare in her eyes was intolerably bright—"those who tormented you shall die the death ere they have reached the count his castle's bar-bican."

"How? Will you strike them with a curse, Milady?"

She drew a little phial from her dress, set her teeth in the cork and opened it, then poured a scruple of black liquid in her cupped palm. "Look, Jew," she ordered as she held her hand out to him. "Gaze into yon pool and tell me what it is you see."

The inky liquid seemed to cloud with gray, as though a drop of cream had been spilled in it; then it boiled suddenly, and from it came a little puff of acrid steam that stung his eyes until they watered, but through the tears he seemed to look down a long vista at the end of which a wooden bridge was swung across a torrent which ran howling through a rocky gorge. He saw a little troop of horsemen clatter out upon the bridge, and at their head he saw Hans Peter, captain of the count's Swiss mercenaries, at whose orders his teeth had been plucked out as a child or lover plucks the petals from a daisy when he seeks to

know his fortune. He saw the cavalcade ride to the center of the bridge, saw the stout timbering of the causeway break as if it had been reeds beneath the weight of the mailed hooves, saw men and horses tumble through the wreckage to the rocks that seemed to gnash like teeth of a voracious maw. . . .

"Are you satisfied, good usurer?" he heard the lady's mocking voice.

"Nay, Lady, what I saw may have been sooth, or may have been a wish which took on seeming as I gazed into the liquor," he answered cautiously. "How shall I know Hans Peter and his fell crew perished thus?"

She smiled—a thin, slow smile. "Before the horologe upon the Town House sounds the curfew you will have confirmation of your vision, Jew," she told him. "If it cometh not, forget I ever asked a loan of you, but if it comes, bring you the gold to Jacques the steward's house within the hour, and you shall have repayment with full usury before a fortnight passeth."

THE tale of how the count's men perished stem and branch when the bridge crashed under them was bruited through the city streets that evening, and shortly after sunset Abarbanel came to Jacques' house with two hundred golden leopards. "What will you give in pledge of payment, Lady mine?" he asked Fourchette as he put the metal in her hands.

She smiled on him again, and he felt little chills of terror chase small thrills of fright up his spine as she pulled three hairs from her head, knotted them together, and dropped them in his open palm. "Put them in your strong box, usurer," she bade, "and at the hour of sundown this day seven-night open the casket and see what you shall see."

Grumbling he shuffled back to his house. Too late for regrets now, she had the money . . . but she had shown him how

Hans Peter and the count's men died, perhaps . . . he was a fool to trust such things, but he would put the three hairs in his strong box. . . .

The sun had scarce had time to sink behind the gambreled roofs when, one week later, he rushed to his treasure chest, undid its fourteen locks and flung the lid back. Where three golden hairs had rested on the notes of hand and foreign bills of exchange were now three piles of golden coins, three hundred leopards minted with the sign of English Edward's majesty—his loan repaid with half again the principal for usury.

6. *" . . . and an Haughty Spirit Before Destruction"*

FOURCHETTE had been a pretty girl, but with maturing womanhood she flowered royally. Her dazzling fairness was always set off by a gown of green, her wondrous hair was plaited in two long, full braids that fell below her knees; she wore bracelets of fine gold on either wrist and round her neck a chain of beaten gold as heavy as a fetter. Men marveled at her fascination and admired and obeyed her without question. She was a woman of fire, her face was a pale flame, her eyes blue lightning-flashes, her speech a shower of scintillating sparks. As by a miracle Abarbanel the usurer had become open-handed.

Tight-fisted, grasping, holding out for ruinously high interest with all others, he lent money in whatever sum she asked without demur. She it was, and she alone, who kept the château solvent by her credit with the Jewish banker. No demand the seigneur made was too fantastic, he needed but to voice his wants and straightway she supplied them. Nor—miracle of miracles!—did Abarbanel ever press for payment; indeed, the only thing that seemed to give him greater pleasure than

renewing an old loan was making fresh advances.

Sire Raymond had gone to the English wars, and with him rode his might of knights and squires and men-at-arms. In his absence the Lady Iseult, chatelain of the castle, ruled his house and lands and people, and: "I will have naught of this Jacques jackanapes and his proud upstart wife," quoth she. "Too long my lord has let them have their high and mighty way, collecting rents and tribute-moneys from our people, factoring loans from usurers, and holding back a noble portion of the whole for their own behoof. Henceforth I will be both reeve and bailiff, overseer and collector."

So Jacques was driven from his seat beneath the feudal tree and the proud Lady Iseult took his place upon the bancal to receive the seigneur's moneys. But however nobly born she be, a woman is a woman still, and the tenants slacked in payment of their rents, and presently the harvests failed, and the English took Sire Raymond captive and held him for a mighty ransom, and when the lady chatelain approached Abarbanel with demands for a loan, he would not let her have a groat until he had an earnest-payment on the principal and interest which was long past due. They resorted to the mild persuasions of the times, and then he swore he was a ruined man with only a few pence laid by to feed his starving wife and children, and persisted in this stubbornness until he fainted three times under torment. So, at her wits' end for the necessary metal, the Lady Iseult left him swooning on the floor, applied the torch to his house and in no highly Christian temper called upon Fourchette.

Not as villein-wife to her lady, nor as equal to an equal, but as superior to suppliant Fourchette received the Lady Iseult. She kept her waiting in the chilly common room for more than half an hour, and

when she finally appeared made no obeisance to her noble visitor, but addressed her coldly, almost with contempt. "I know full well you come to me because all other means have failed you, Milady. You are hard-pressed for money, and in desperate case. Hear, then the terms on which I will relieve you: My man shall be restored to his reeveship, but with authority to collect moneys from the gentle, as well as the base-born, and for his service he shall have the third, no longer a fourth merely, of the moneys he collects. Whenever business calls him to the château all shall do him honor, from the highest to the lowest, and at his approach the horns shall blow and all the castle guard turn out. Me you shall greet with gentle courtesy, and all your people, from belted knight to scullery lad, shall lout low at my coming. These be my terms, Milady, and not for less will I procure thee one stiver."

The Lady Iseult ground her teeth in rage, but poverty takes no denial, and her need was very great. So she curtsied low to Fourchette, as to a bishop or a princess, and went her ways in silent anger.

Next day five thousand silver pounds were paid in her hand by Abarbanel the usurer.

### 7. *A Doctrinal Discussion*

THEY made high holiday at the château, for Sire Raymond, ransomed from the English, had come again to his own place. Above the common table where the squires and men-at-arms were seated rose the seigneur's board, and on it were heaped brimming platters of roast meat and fowl, fish, comfits, sweetmeats and marchpane, while the pages passed from bench to bench with silver flagons of strong, heady wine.

Beside the Lady Iseult sat her chaplain Frère Ambroise, and by him Frey Tomàs de Astorga, fresh from Prague and Cologne, where his zeal as Grand Inquisitor

had spread terror and dismay in every witches' coven between the Rhine and Elbe. "Meseemeth thy shrewd powers might be used to good purpose in this our city, good Father," Lady Iseult told the dour Spaniard. "There walks one amongst us who might merit thy investigation. But five years since she was a serf's wife, toiling for her keep like any of her kind, but suddenly she blossomed forth with sudden wealth, and since that day the times make fair for her. Does any lack for gold? Only through her may the Jewish banker be approached; to others he turns a deaf ear—myself have been denied a paltry loan by him—but at her word he opens up his coffers and disgorges precious metal as if it had been brass or copper. When others' crops failed in the blight her corn and vines bore bounteously; when the black death stalked our towns and countryside she walked forth unafraid and unscathed; yea, though the best and holiest of all our folk were smitten by the plague."

"They say she never goeth to the minister," added Frère Ambroise. "'Tis true she is reputed to give much to help the parish poor——"

"The poor we have with us always," Frey Tomás interrupted. "Did not the blessed Master say as much—aye, and scornfully rebuke those who would have had Mary Magdalene's embrocation sold to buy bread for them?" He helped himself to a fresh portion of spiced ox-tongue. "It is no work of merit to give bread unto the hungry. If it were heaven's will that all men should be fed, then we should have no poor, but it is stated explicitly that the poor we shall have with us always. Methinks it might be judged defiance of divine purpose to alleviate their condition. If heaven had not willed that they be poor, then they would not be poor; but since their poverty is obviously by divine decree, whoso maketh them less poor, even though it be by giving them no more than a dry

crust, thwarts heaven's will, and is therefore no better than a heretic. And since all witchcraft is a species of heresy, it follows as the night the day that heresy is also a form of witchcraft, and Holy Scripture saith expressly, 'Thou shalt not suffer any witch to live.' *Dixi.*"

Frère Ambroise scooped a ladleful of stewed lamprey into his platter, sampled it, and found it vastly to his taste. "'Tis a dreadful thing to contemplate the progress which the Devil maketh," he said piously, speaking somewhat thickly, for his mouth was overful with victual. "Since the scandals of the Templars were exposed, 'tis hard to say in what guise Satan will next manifest himself. Against him and his servants only one thing avails, the stake."

Frey Tomás gulped a cup of wine. It was not as good as his own native sherris, but 'twould pass. "Excellently spoken, reverend sir," he agreed. "Thou sayest very well, indeed; but in our work among the wizards of the Reich and Bohemia we found that the stake itself is not always sufficient. Were it not better that the erring soul be purified and purged by fasting, contemplation and mild discipline for a time, so that at last, although the body be destroyed by fire, the better and immortal part be saved? To burn the adjudged witch or warlock is indeed needful, but if the sinner be burnt in his unrepentant pride he well may go in seeming triumph to the stake, and thus set a bad example to the people."

He beamed with Christian love upon the Lady Iseult. "If you, Milady, in the goodness of your heart would undertake the task of working on our erring sister's stubborn heart, setting her for some few years in a sweet retreat to which you only had the key, you might by proper loving adjuration and the imposition of indulgent discipline bring her to a state of grace, so that, chastened, meek and humble, she

might at last shame the Foul Fiend and go rejoicing to the stake, a ransomed soul."

"Perhaps"—the Lady Iseult had not thought of this before—"perhaps my lord would not consent. He is somewhat beholden to the witch-wife."

"He must consent, Milady." Thus the chaplain. "If the woman truly be a witch—and good Frey Tomás who is expert in such matters tells us that she doubtless is—why, then, it is his duty to consent. For the sake of his good, lawful vassals who have had no traffic with the Evil One, and for all the countryside, it is his duty to have her delivered up for trial."

"But alas, we have no court ecclesiastical to hear her case," the Lady Iseult objected. "Where shall we find a warrant for her apprehension——"

Frey Tomás answered soothingly. He was a man of law as well as of God, and knew his way among the mazes of juridical procedure. "If the erring sister be put in restraints—of the proper sort—and kept in peaceful contemplation for a time, her better nature will at length assert itself, and she will gladly make confession of her error and denounce herself as one of those who has had dealings with the Arch Fiend. Then there will be no warrant necessary. Self-confessed and self-accused, she may be brought before the Prince Bishop for instant sentence and delivered to the secular arm and the purifying fire without delay."

### *8. The Cage Is Prepared*

**S**IRE RAYMOND rode out hawking the next morning, and in his absence Lady Iseult had a busy day. In the ambulatory between the barbican and inner wall of the château was an old well, not used since the great cistern had been dug in the forecourt, and thither Lady Iseult and her stone mason and his varlets repaired. The well was housed in a small lodge of stone, but there was light enough

to permit work. At Milady's orders they set a strong iron grille across the well's base, a foot or so above the water level, strung an iron dipper by a strong chain to the grating, then proceeded to erect a vaulted dome over the well top, taking care to leave a two-foot hole in it. In this they hinged an iron cover and secured it with a massive lock and hasp. So well the caitiffs worked at Lady Iseult's urging that the sun was but four hours past the prime when all was done. Then Milady had compassion on the mason and his crew, and bade them come into the hall and cool their gullets with a stoup of wine.

The drink was slightly bitter, but a dusty throat excuses lack of flavor, and so they drank not one, but several cups. After that it remained but to bury them in a convenient trench, for the venom in the wine was very potent, and they all died quickly, though not painlessly.

**F**OURCHETTE was very happy. Five years and more had sped since she made her compact with the Evil One, and they had been good years, full years, years packed with peace and plenty. Now came power. The Lady Iseult, albeit with bad grace, had restored Jacques to place and favor, he was treated like a grandee when he went to the castle, and even she, Fourchette the villein's wife, a mere serf of the body, was entreated courteously, knights and squires doffing their headgear in her presence, lesser folk genuflecting as to a lady born when she passed by. Her status was assured. With the wealth of Abarbanel to back her and the power that money gives within her hand she had no longer any need of Satan, or his aid. Tomorrow she would seek the parish priest and make confession of her error, submit to such penance as he chose to inflict—be sure, Fourchette, it will not be a heavy one when you declare your intention of a gift sufficient to build a new church and fur-

nish it with painted windows and a silver reliquary set with gold and precious jewels!—then, once again a Christian in good standing, she would take her place among the elect of the town.

Poor Satan! She had used him shabbily. He had kept his bargain to the letter; all her enemies had perished miserably, she who had been a serf and villein's mate was now become a great lady. Almost she could feel it in her heart to pity him . . . but he was such a fool . . . why should one keep her compact with the Devil when she might have all that he offered, and give nothing in return?

Hark! What was that clamor at the door? A sudden gust of roaring tempest? How the stout oak panels shook! The iron staves that held the portal fast seemed bending under a tremendous force! Could it be a mob collected, bent on sacking this fine house of hers? They would not dare—all knew how any who offended her met quick misfortune. . . .

"Ha, Jezebel, foul witch, vile myrmidon of Satan; we have thee!" The groined roof echoed to the pounding of mailed feet, the firelight flashed on sword and partizan and ax. They pounced upon her like hounds on the fox when he is run to earth. Hemp chafed her tender wrists, a soldier knocked her two-horned bonnet off and spurned it with his foot; another snatched the golden chain from round her neck. A dreadful, searing pain against her face—another—they had torn the long gold pendants from her ears, dragging flesh and gold away together. A page-boy darted from the mass of men-at-arms and with his dagger slit her fine green robe from waist to hem. Two other half-grown lads rushed up, long dog-whips in their hands, and swift and pitilessly fell the whistling lashes. Her bodice had been ripped away and red, thick welts formed on her tortured back, while all the noble company laughed in high glee as she fell

shuddering to the floor. But the pages whipped her up again.

"On thy feet, witch! Would you make us carry thee to thine abiding-place?"

Before the Lady Iseult's feet Fourchette knelt down upon her knees and bowed her head in all humility. "I do beseech your Ladyship to grant me boon of covering. Do not, I prithee, drag me forth into the streets all naked."

A square of sacking, foul with stable-soil, was brought and draped about her lash-marked, trembling shoulders. "Twill be enough for thee, witch-wife; there'll be small need of dainty raiment in the place to which thou goest!"

### 9. *Fourchette's Lace*

THE blackness of the dungeon was so absolute she could discern no difference between open and closed eyes. If she stood in the center of the grating she could touch the stone walls of her prison each side with her out-stretched hands, nor did she need to hold her arms full-length to do it. If she stood on the grating . . . but she could not. The roof was too low to permit her to stand upright, and though she was a little woman she could not lie full-length in her cell. Sitting was the only natural posture she could assume; she could neither lie stretched out to sleep nor stand erect to ease her cramping muscles, and the blackness . . . the unutterable, inky blackness! She felt as if she smothered, it was pressing in on her like something solid; so she screamed and beat her head against the stones until she swooned, and when she came to it was still around her, crowding, bearing down upon her, suffocating her with its solidity.

She realized where they had put her. It was an oubliette, a forgetress, an *in pace*—for such they humorously called the lightless, almost airless dungeons where the living dead were immolated to go slowly



mad if they were luckless, or find quick oblivion and surcease in insanity if fortune favored them.

Creeping across the grating with exploring hands she found the chain to which the dipper swung. Pulling it up from the brackish water, she drank. It was foul and slime-scummed, but it eased her throat, rasped raw with futile screaming, and she drank and drank again. How long had she been there? She had fainted when they brought her to the château and informed her she must spend a term *in pace* and would be released on one condition, that she own herself a witch and go forthwith to the stake. When she came to, she had been here—how long? Time stands still in utter darkness; she might have lain there for a day, a week—no, if she had been there so long she would feel the pangs of hunger, for she had not eaten. . . . She crawled across the grating on bruised hands and knees again. What was that her fingers touched? Something cold and sleek and greasy. She recoiled in horror from the loathsome thing; it felt like dead flesh.

She raised her fingers to her face, smelled them. It was flesh. Roast meat. And she was hungry, ravenous. Wolfishly she gnawed the bone, worrying it until no scrap of meat was left on it. Then, replete with food, she slept.

A LITTLE light shone in the darkness. No, it was not light, it was a blacker blackness, the dim outlines of a form more solid than the solid gloom of the unchanging night that filled her dungeon. "Fourchette!" The voice was soft and musical; a little sad, a little mocking.

"Yea, lord!" She recognized it, though she had not heard it since that day in her unwindowed cabin when she made her pact with hell.

"You are in evil case, my little one."

"I be in evil case, great sir, but I have

no one but myself to blame. Had I not considered cheating thee——"

His almost soundless mocking laughter silenced her. "What would you give to be freed from this place?"

"Alackaday, great sir, what have I left to give? My body and my soul are thine already——"

"Yea, that I know full well. You have erred and strayed from my ways like a lost sheep, and are no more worthy to be called my bride, but I have pity on you for the service you have done me aforetime. Pluck out ten hairs from your head and weave them into a spider-web. It will not be an easy task, and many times you'll fail at it, but if you persist you will come at last to success. When at last the work is done and a web woven to my liking—then we shall see what we shall see. Farewell awhile, Fourchette."

Furiously she plucked the hairs from her head, eagerly she set to work to fashion them into the pattern of a spider-web. In the blackness of the dungeon she could not see what she did; before she'd worked for half a minute she had snarled the strands past hope of disentanglement. Ten more hairs, a quarter-hour's work in blindness, another hopeless snarl. Still she persisted, pulling hair on hair, starting each new piece of work in high hope, ending in despair as black as the air of her dungeon.

UP ON the bright green earth where sunrise followed sunset and season took the place of season four years passed into eternity. In the lightless dungeon where Fourchette toiled endlessly, four times four thousand years seemed to have passed. But she took no count of time, for time had long since ceased for her. Work, sleep, eat rotting meat when it was thrown to her, drink foul, stinking water from the dipper chained to the grating—that was her program, and it varied not at all from one year's end to another's. She

was almost wholly bald, for hair of glowing golden hair had been snatched out for her weaving, yet always, soon or late, she spoiled the work. Three times a week the Lady Iseult came to the dungeon, undid the heavy lock which held the iron cover in place, and dropped a chunk of rotting meat into the cell. "Are you ready to confess your sin and go to the stake now, witch-wife?" she called each time she threw the stinking food down. But there was never an answer. In the darkness she could descry Fourchette bent at work, but Fourchette did not see her. Like one possessed she wove and knotted hairs into the pattern of a spider-web, and long ago her optic nerves had atrophied. Light and darkness were all one to her.

At last she sank back on her haunches, smiling in the blackness. A perfect web had been constructed, free of tangles, knots and snarls. "The work is done, great sir," she murmured. "Your handmaiden awaits your judgment."

She felt his touch upon her hairless head. A sudden fiery thrill ran through her, followed by an icy chill. Somehow, she had changed, but how she did not know. She knew only that the dungeon seemed to have expanded mightily; it was vast as a great castle, and—she could run up its smooth sides as easily as she could creep across the grating of its floor. Also, for the first time in so many years she could not count them, she could see a little—not very well, but still a little. She could make out the joints in the masonry, and they seemed as wide as highways. Slight irregularities in the squaring of the stones now seemed like hillocks to her. Had the dungeon really grown to giant size, or had she shrunk until she was no larger than the little faery folk who spun their dainty cloths by moonlight?

"THE time is come, Milady," Chaplain Ambroise said. "Let us fetch our erring sister from her place of contemplation and repentance. Tomorrow the Prince Bishop burns a hundred witches and warlocks, minus one. It would be a dainty gesture for us to complete the tale and make an even hundred *penitentes* for the auto da fé."

They ringed about the dungeon entrance with their swords and partizans as if they had come out to take some savage beast or strong and fearsome robber instead of one weak woman—and her blind.

"By'r Lakin!" cried a soldier as they threw the dungeon cover back. He struck at something with his pike-blade, missed it, and crossed himself with more piety than he'd shown in many a day.

"What was it, Jouffroy?" asked the Lady Iseult.

"Naught but a spider, Milady. It must have made its dwelling in the dungeon with the witch-wife, and been frightened by the sudden light. Folk say their bites are poisonous——"

"Spider me no spiders, varlet. Get thee down in yonder hole and drag me out the foul witch."

But though the soldier Jouffroy searched right diligently, and others after him, they found no trace of Fourchette.

And what became of her nobody ever knew.

The Lady Iseult's holiday was spoiled completely. She had promised the Prince Bishop one more witch to burn, and she could not make good her promise.

Perhaps this is significant: In that part of France which was once the ancient Pays de la Montagne the peasants call a cobweb jeweled with morning dew "*la dentelle de Fourchette*"—Fourchette's lace.

