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## Contents for February, 1932

- Cover Design.....C. C. Senf  
*Illustrating a scene in "The Devil's Bride"*
- The Eyrie..... 148  
*A chat with the readers*
- The Devil's Bride (Part 1).....Seabury Quinn 152  
*A tale of devil-worship, that contains horror, thrills, shudders, breath-taking interest, suspense, and vivid action*
- Night and Silence.....Maurice Level 175  
*A new and grimly powerful short story by a great French master of the weird tale*
- The Three from the Tomb.....Edmond Hamilton 178  
*A dramatic thrill-tale about three millionaires, dead and buried for months, who reappeared among the living*

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

- Devouring Shadows**-----**N. J. O'Neil** 198  
*An arresting weird-scientific story of shadows from the fourth dimension that descended in force upon our world*
- The Thing on the Roof**-----**Robert E. Howard** 213  
*A shuddery tale of an old, legend-haunted tomb in Honduras, and the doom that pursued the man who opened it*
- The Tree-Men of M'Bwa**-----**Donald Wandrei** 220  
*A startling story of Africa, strange monstrosities, and the weird power of the Whirling Flux*
- The Gallows Tree**-----**Otis Adelbert Kline** 227  
*Verse*
- The Laughing Duke**-----**Wallace G. West** 228  
*A romantic story of the eery revenge of Florian, Duke of Orstow, in the days of the robber barons*
- The Haunted Chair (Conclusion)**-----**Gaston Leroux** 242  
*A novel of eery murders, strange assassinations and weird adventures, by the author of "The Phantom of the Opera"*
- The Horror in the Hold**-----**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 259  
*A tale of the old adventurous days when Spain and England fought for the supremacy of the seas*
- Weird Story Reprint:**
- The Wolf-Leader (Part 7)**-----**Alexandre Dumas** 265  
*A werewolf story by a great French novelist, which does not appear in his collected works in English*
- Dream Justice**-----**E. W. Mayo** 287  
*A brief tale, about a man who dreamed that he committed a murder, and the startling result of his dream*

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# The Laughing Duke

By WALLACE G. WEST

*An eery tale of the days of the robber barons, when human life was cheap—  
the revenge of Duke Florian*

**I**N THE old time, when the world was full of a number of things which have since been forgotten, a great man lay dying at his castle in the land of Provence.

He was Florian of Orthow, known throughout France as the Laughing Duke, and he was gasping out his life in his tall canopied bed from the effects of what had at first been considered a minor dagger wound in the back.

Monsieur Morand, the physician, felt the nobleman's pulse for the last time, gathered up his leeches in their little jars, his lancet, the bleeding-bowl which held a few ounces of watery fluid which he had just drained from the duke's veins, and shook his head sorrowfully.

"I have done all I can," he announced, bowing to Sir Robert, the duke's nephew and now rightful heir. "It distresses me greatly to see such a fine gentleman die at the hands of a cowardly assassin, but my medicines can do no more."

Sir Robert shook his black curly head slowly and replied: "'Tis not your fault, doctor, but that of my scoundrelly cousin who lies in prison awaiting the hangman.

"Come," he added. "There is nothing more you can do here. I know you will wish to prepare for your long journey back to Paris and I would have a word with you before you depart. Monsignor Bellaire" (he bowed to a monstrosly fat, sweet-faced monk who sat at the bedside) "will watch over my uncle until I return,"

Robert led the way to his uncle's spacious library, a tall gloomy room lined with strange, incomprehensible books by such savants as Paracelsus, Van Helmont

and Agrippa von Nettesheim. Once there he locked the door carefully and his whole attitude changed.

"Jacques," he said to the doctor, "you have played your part well. Although you never held a license from any college of surgeons you have bled the life out of yon old buzzard in a workman-like and thorough-going manner. Here is your reward."

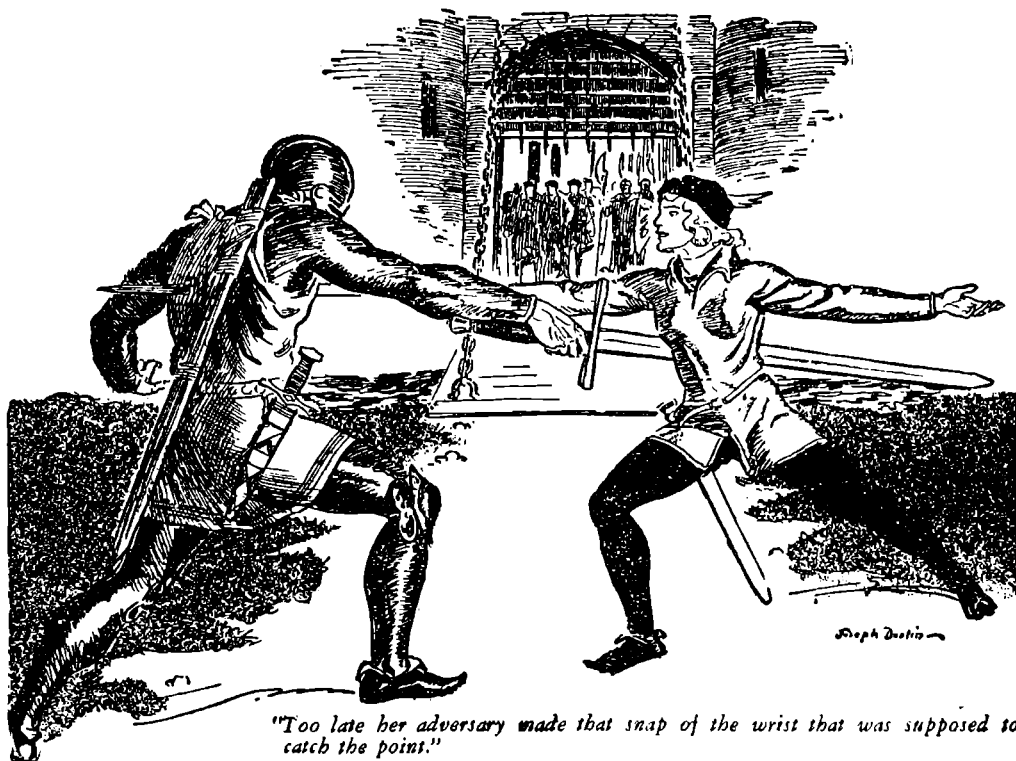
He dropped a sack of gold into the claw-like hand extended.

"But remember, our lives are not safe until the crow of my cousin Gilbert has been properly stretched at Avignon prison. And," he added sharply, "if you should dare turn traitor and cross me"—the pseudo-physician's wizened face paled before the steady glare of those black eyes—"if you should cross me, I shall cross you in a somewhat different fashion, though I die for it." And Black Robert, as he was known to his few friends and many enemies, significantly touched the dagger at his side.

Be it said for the physician that he did not visibly quail.

"Your grace knows I have served you well on other occasions," he replied calmly. "Better receive small pay from one you can trust," and he sneered slightly as he weighed the sack of ducats in his hand, "than have your gullet slit by others who make better promises."

**I**N THE sickroom at that moment a terrific struggle seemed to be going on in the dying man. Under its shock of silver hair the duke's face, whose bloodless outlines had a few minutes before been



*"Too late her adversary made that snap of the wrist that was supposed to catch the point."*

marked by the peaceful seal of death, twitched and quivered as though the soul, at the very moment of departure, had decided to return.

With a desperate effort the old man sat erect. His hands emerged from under the bedclothing. His voice croaked unintelligibly.

Hurriedly the priest slipped one hand behind the dying man's shoulders and whispered reassuringly, "Yes, yes."

But this only increased the duke's fury. At last his voice became audible.

"A pen. A pen," he rasped. "Write! Write!"

The priest placed a wetted goose-quill in his writhing fingers and a large piece of parchment on his knees.

As though his soul were driving an already dead body, the hand began to move jerkily.

"From knowledge vouchsafed me while

dying," the words sprawled crazily across the page, "I, Florian, Duke of Orthow, hereby disinherit my nephew, Robert the Black-hearted, and charge him with having murder——"

Here the pen went out of control. Grimly the man on the bed fought to make it conform to his iron will, but in vain. The goose-quill slipped gradually from his stiffening fingers.

At that moment the great door of the chamber opened and Sir Robert returned.

The duke looked up, his writing forgotten. One emaciated arm rose shakily, but the fingers hung limp as he tried to shake his fist at the younger man.

"I heard! I heard!" cried he in the same great voice with which he had many times led men to battle. "Robin, thou cowardly ingrate. I—will—return!"

Then, as he saw the altered look on the face of his nephew the old man burst out

into a great laugh. It rang through the dusk of the bedchamber like a bugle call—that same laugh which had made the duke famous throughout all France: mocking, debonair and unafraid of God or devil.

And, still laughing, the duke toppled backward on the pillows. This time he was entirely a corpse.

Pale as though he had met a ghost, Black Robert advanced to the bedside, roughly pushing away a nurse who had rushed to his uncle's assistance. Picking up a mirror, he held it to the still lips. There was no cloud upon the glass. The breath had stopped.

"Strange that his mind should wander at the last," said the knight in a shaken voice. "I had hoped he might die content. But it must have been delirium," he added, looking stealthily at Monsignor Bellaire. "Did he say anything else?"

"Nothing beyond asking for pen and parchment."

The new Duke of Orthow snatched at the paper. As he saw the writing was meaningless a sickly smile spread over his swarthy, handsome countenance.

"Vagaries of a wandering mind," he muttered. "But they hurt. For I loved him like a son since he took me and my ungrateful cousin under his protection years ago."

He bowed his head, gave a few orders relative to funeral arrangements and walked slowly from the room to the accompaniment of muttered prayers from Father Bellaire, who was kneeling at the foot of the bed, and muffled sobs from the nurse, who had loved her master.

The funeral was held with all the pomp of a great house. Not many days thereafter Duke Robert mounted his black charger and, with his great, two-handed sword clanking in its scabbard between his shoulder-blades, rode down to Avignon to see that justice was done to that

rascally Gilbert who had been convicted of stabbing his uncle in the back.

NOT many weeks later Monsignor Bellaire officiated at another death-bed, that of Lady Dorothy, daughter of the widowed Duchess of Mecklenberg, whose castle lay not far from that of Orthow.

"Ah, Dorothy, Dorothy," the good priest murmured, stroking the soft chestnut hair of the beautiful girl who lay pining her heart away between the silken sheets. "Why will you mourn for Duke Robert, who is unworthy of you? His ambitions have made him forget your love for him. That should show he was unworthy of your love. Forget him. Smile at the sun once again, as you did when I taught you your catechism years ago."

But the girl only turned her face a little more toward the wall. The monk sighed and glanced at the physician.

Dr. Vosberg shook his head sorrowfully.

"It is no use, father," he said. "Physically there is nothing wrong with her, yet life is flowing from Lady Dorothy as though from a sieve. She refuses to live. Poor, foolish girl."

The priest nodded.

"Strange," he said. "She loved Robert, while Gilbert loved her. And now Robert is Duke of Orthow and has pledged his troth to another, while Gilbert, who was to have been the duke, rots in Avignon prison. I wonder," he added thoughtfully, "if Gilbert really killed the old duke. It was not his nature."

The doctor's answer was interrupted by a slight commotion on the bed. "Look," he cried. "The end has come." Picking up the inevitable mirror he held it to the quiet lips. Not a cloud showed.

Father Bellaire crossed himself and began murmuring the liturgy for the dead. "Not yet, father!"

It was the girl who had spoken.

Both men stared thunder-struck as Dorothy turned her face from the wall and opened her eyes.

"Not yet, father," she repeated. "I'm not dead. There's too much for me to do." She actually tried to sit up but was too weak.

"Dorothy, Dorothy," cried the priest, his face bathed in tears. "My child has returned."

"Yes, perhaps," replied the girl, her rich contralto voice growing strong. "But have them bring me some food, I'm abominably hungry."

Dorothy's recovery was almost miraculously rapid. Within two days she was up and about and frightening her mother, the widowed duchess, with her strange caprices. For somewhere during her illness the girl had acquired a mordant sarcasm unlike that of her former gentle self.

In fact, her language showed traces of the vitriol of an old campaigner when she used it upon retainers of the duchy who had grown lax in their duties since the duke's death.

As she grew stronger Dorothy strode about the castle and its environs with a lithe, free stride that made her mother blush and remonstrate in vain, and tongue-lashed the gardeners, the hostlers, the peasants and the overseers until the duchy, which had been falling into decay, began to resume the appearance of old times.

"Dorothy, Dorothy," moaned the duchess, who was the soul of propriety, "whatever has come over you? Where has my sweet girl gone? You have forgotten your embroidery and your painting and go tramping about for all the world as if you were a man."

"Don't worry, mother," answered her daughter, kissing her tenderly. "But, damn it all, there's so much to be done. I've almost regained my strength now. When I'm fit I'll be leaving you for a

while. Dark deeds have been done in Provence, and I am the only one who can right them."

Turning on her heel in the dress which she had shortened beyond all seemliness, Dorothy left her mother staring open-mouthed.

A week thereafter a youth, dressed in light but costly chain armor and wearing at his side a slim scabbard which held the strangest sword ever seen in Provence, slipped out of the postern gate of Mecklenberg at dawn, leading the slim gray horse which once had been a favorite of the duke. Mounting, he rode briskly down the road toward Avignon.

The duchess fainted some hours later when her maid reported that Dorothy was nowhere to be found.

**I**N AVIGNON prison Gilbert of Orthow sat watching the construction of his own gallows from the window of his cell. It was a spring morning. Flowers were blossoming in crannies of the prison yard. A robin hopped upon the ledge of his barred window and eyed him pertly. Gilbert tossed it a few crumbs which were left from his breakfast and smiled faintly.

He was a handsome chap, with curly red hair, blue eyes with depths to them and a long, lean body. His face showed the strain of his many days in prison; his skin was pale. But there was a quirk in the corners of his mouth as he watched the bird eagerly gobbling the crumbs.

"That's right, old fellow. Enjoy yourself while you may," he chuckled, the robin cocking one round eye at him the while. "Eat heartily, for tomorrow you too may fall into a snare."

In the prison yard all was activity, for it was not often the warden had opportunity of hanging the cousin of a duke. The gallows was being built strong and high. The Duke of Orthow himself had given advice on its construction.

Gilbert, tired of watching the workmen and the soft blue sky which he would see no more after the next two days, sat down on his pallet and eased the leg shackle which bound him to the wall.

It was a cruel thing with teeth inside which bit into the flesh if he moved suddenly.

"Don't kick against the pricks!" he quoted. "But I'm lucky not to be in the stinking dungeon. It must have been dear Rob's idea to place me where I could see the gallows go up."

He sighed. His only consolation during the month of his imprisonment had been occasional visits from Father Bellaire. The tall, rotund prelate, with his gentle voice and friendly humor, wedged himself into the cell whenever he could leave his pastoral duties and joked with or comforted the prisoner as need was.

But Gilbert knew he was making his parish rounds today and could not come.

The condemned man's meditations were broken by the rattling of keys in the ponderous lock of the cell door. The night guard entered, yawning, for it was near the end of his watch. Behind him was a friar in black robe and tightly drawn cowl.

"The priest asked to see you," said the guard roughly but not unkindly. "I brought him in, as I thought since you will be stretched all out of shape presently you would want to come to some sort of terms with God." He grinned. "When you are through, call for Henri," he added to the priest. "He will let you out. I will be off duty."

Gilbert stared at the newcomer as the guard withdrew. When they were alone the friar tossed back his cowl and stepped into the sunlight which had just begun pouring through the high window.

"Dorothy!" cried the prisoner. "How come you here? And I heard you were ill unto death at Castle Mecklenberg."

She laughed, a low throaty murmur which made the robin who still sat upon the window-ledge so jealous he abandoned hope of more crumbs and took flight.

"I thought better of dying," she replied. "Listen. There is little time for talking. We must get out of here as soon as the guards change." She waved aside his startled remonstrance. "Enough to say I know you are innocent and that Robert is as black a villain as his nickname would indicate."

"But you are mad!" cried Gilbert. "Look. They are building my gallows already. Before two suns have set I shall be as dead as my uncle."

"You may be wrong on both points," smiled the girl. "Be quiet and I shall tell you how we may fool these dolts of guards and escape. See," she took from under her cassock another robe. "This was made for Father Bellaire. It would cover a—griffin. We will fix it—so."

She threw the garment over his shoulders and pulled the cowl tight.

"Now stand still while I show you a trick I learned in Florence—I mean a trick I heard was once used there. Look. I will stand on your toes—so. I am quite short, thank heaven. Now pull the robe about both of us. There! Doesn't that make a sizable paunch for you? Now fold your hands piously as Father Bellaire does, bow your head and waddle ponderously about.

"Splendid," she cried, popping her head from under the cassock. "That would fool the good devil himself. Now, quick, quick! Roll the bed-clothes to represent Sir Gilbert of Orthow lying on his pallet trying to snatch a few hours of troubled rest before he goes where rest is never troubled. When the new guard passes he must see Father Bellaire sadly contemplating a sleeping prisoner. Oh, that sleepy Armand will never

think to tell his friend Henri it is not Father Bellaire who visits you today. At least I hope not. If he does, it will be adieu, my friend."

"But Dorothy, I can not allow you to imperil yourself like this for me," cried Gilbert, who had just managed to catch his breath after all the preparations. "I insist that you——"

"Insist! Insist! Who are you to insist? You're the same as a dead man. Did you ever defy your uncle when he told you to do something for your own good and the good of France? Well, your uncle has made me his agent—never mind how—so do as you're told, youngster."

With no more ado she set to work at the soft iron of his gyles with a file, muffling the sound under her robe.

An hour later, when that work was done, there was the clank of halberds in the corridor as the guard was changed. The two conspirators took their positions.

"Your blessing, Father Bellaire," said Henri a few minutes later as he peered through the door on his tour of inspection.

"You have it, my son," replied Gilbert from beneath his cowl, endeavoring to imitate the quiet voice of the prelate.

Henri passed on without suspicion.

"Now for it," came the muffled voice of Dorothy a few minutes later. "I'm almost smothered under this robe."

The guard returned at Gilbert's call and unlocked the door. Striving as best he could to imitate the shuffling gait of the man he was supposed to be, the prisoner and his living burden followed Henri down the hall and into the courtyard.

The long robe swept the ground and evidently no one noticed his awkwardness.

Out the prison gate they stumbled and into the crooked streets. Gilbert felt his heart beating heavily with the strain and the girl's fluttering in answer to it.

"Turn up the first alley," she whis-

pered. "There are horses for us there. Is anybody about?"

"Only a few laborers. They see nothing wrong about a lopsided priest. But best be silent——"

Slowly he plowed through the mud of the fetid alley she had indicated until two tethered horses came in sight.

Dorothy slipped from his arms and shed her robe. He saw she was dressed in a jerkin of mail and rich, dark trunks. On her saddle-bow were strapped a velvet cloak and a queer sort of sword.

"Up with you," she cried gayly. "Keep your robe. You shall still be a priest escorting a knight on some holy journey. Have no fear, Dobbin will not throw you, father," she mocked.

From under the edge of his cowl Gilbert stared with amazement and secret delight at this stalwart, beautiful Diana, who rode her charger straight as a soldier and whistled a rollicking song of the camps as they left the awakening town, passed by the palace of the popes and rode out into the flowering hedgerows and orchards of the open country.

He had loved Dorothy as a quiet, bashful girl, who sat with downcast eyes beside her mother, embroidering or playing the harpischord. But as he saw her now, her sweet, softly rounded figure revealed in the clinging mail, she was infinitely more lovable, even though her language, when her horse stumbled once, was not—well——

"Dorothy——" he said, then stopped, for there was so much to ask.

She smiled at him.

"Proceed, Sir Knight, and I will endeavor to alleviate your unquenchable curiosity," she jeered, and rode on chuckling at his flood of questions, most of which she skilfully avoided answering.

Knowing the alarm would be given at the next round of the guard they rode toward Paris at top speed, for there the girl



said she might obtain evidence to prove her companion's innocence.

It was a long journey. Though the weather was fine some of the roads still were hock-deep in mud. They slept on horseback and talked little after the first day.

At a village armorer's shop Gilbert found a corselet of lapped steel scales which was not heavy and enabled him to shed his shabby prison raiment and assume the guise of a gentleman once more.

They obtained changes of horses frequently and felt confident of out-distancing all pursuit.

**I**T WAS dusk a week later when they rode unchallenged through the gates of Paris. It had rained that day and their horses sloshed wearily through the tortuous, ill-paved and worse-drained streets.

"Now that we're here," grumbled Gilbert, "you might tell me what you intend to do."

"Softly, softly, Sir Knight," she replied. "First we shall seek one Jacques Morand, physician extraordinary and friend of the new Duke of Orthow. That should be simple unless he is living under an assumed name. We shall look first into the dives and second into the prisons. If he is in neither place, God help us."

With a dexterity which showed her entirely familiar with the infamous by-streets of Paris, Dorothy led the way toward Montmartre, inquiring at likely and boisterous dens regarding the object of their search.

It was not long until a blousy landlord recalled a Dr. Morand.

"Aye! A truly great physician," he declared, spreading apart his fat hands. "Always with money in his pocket. Not three days ago he royally entertained his friends here, and paid me a pretty penny for the privilege. Just now he is recovering from that entertainment. You prob-

ably will find him, gentlemen, in his chemist's shop at the corner of the Rues Falaise and Burgos."

Following his directions they were not long in drawing up before the shop, if such it might be called. It was located in a foul-smelling basement from which a slippery flight of stairs led to the street.

They descended noiselessly, and peered through a dirty window. A candle, stuck in a wine-bottle, sat on a long table just inside. Near it the pseudo-physician hunched over a great tome, laboriously spelling out the Latin words. A yellow cat sat upright beyond the candle and stared unwinkingly into the flame.

From time to time Morand would dip his hand into a basin beside him and return it full of sunflower seeds which he nibbled at his leisure.

"Now," whispered Dorothy. "You are stronger. Hold him while I stuff a handkerchief into his mouth and bind him with the rope of your cassock."

Together they flung their shoulders against the door. It crashed open. Morand leaped to his feet, one hand still full of seeds, the other gripping a wicked dagger. Behind him the cat swelled to twice its normal size and spat.

It was a quick fight and merry, but Monsieur Morand was out of training and soon was tripped up, bound, gagged and flung into a corner. The cat crouched beside him.

"Now what?" queried Gilbert.

"First push the table against the door and draw the shades," directed Dorothy. "Then, I suppose," she added in a louder tone, "we shall have to torture this dog until he confesses who hired him to murder Duke Florian."

The figure in the corner writhed and gurgled.

"We will try a trick I learned—I mean that was used during the wars with Italy," she continued, winking one brown eye at

Gilbert. "It can't possibly maim a man. Of course he may drown, if he's stubborn, but that's his own fault.

"Do you fasten this person face upward on the floor. Tie his arms and legs to anything solid. He mustn't be able to squirm. Now I need a good, strong funnel. Ah, here is one that's just right. Lucky we are dealing with a famous physician who keeps such trifles handy. Now, most important, I must have water."

She searched carefully, but no water was available.

"Well, this will do just as well," she said finally, trundling a cask of wine from the shadows. "He will at least die happy.

"Splendid work, Gil," she continued in her semi-monotone as she saw her early instructions had been obeyed. "Now sit you down and hold this fine gentleman's nose, firmly—so, while I remove this gag and insert the end of the funnel between his teeth. Bravo! 'Tis done.

"Now, friend Jacques," she snapped, all her raillery gone, "will you sign a confession telling who hired you to bleed Duke Florian to his death, and also who had him stabbed in the dark?"

"You devil," gasped the rat-faced physician through his funnel, "let me up at once or I shall shout for the guard."

"So, you are obdurate," said his tormenter. "Hold his nose tightly, Gilbert. We shall strive to dampen his ardor."

Dipping a big ladle of wine from the cask, she poured it gurgling down the funnel. Morand spluttered, choked, then, to get air again, drank the potion in long gulps.

"Now will you sign?" queried the girl.

He shook his head stubbornly, but there was a look of terror in his eyes. She refilled the ladle and poured again.

Gilbert felt sick but kept tight hold on the prone man's nostrils as he heaved and struggled.

The battle was won as Dorothy filled the dipper for the sixth time. His eyes distended, his face purple, the miserable doctor nodded his head frantically as the wine hovered over him.

"Oh, God, no more!" he panted when he could breathe again. "I'm splitting. A pen—paper. I'll tell everything; only put that cursed funnel away."

And tell everything he did as he crouched again beside the candle and scribbled furiously while his teeth chattered like castanets.

The gist of the document was that Sir Robert, realizing that Gilbert, being slightly older and a favorite, would receive the title at the death of Duke Florian, had hit upon a scheme of stabbing the old man and throwing the blame on his cousin.

The project succeeded so well that when servants, hearing the duke's cries, rushed to the courtyard where he had been walking, they found him with Gilbert's dagger between his ribs from behind while Gilbert himself was kneeling beside the wounded man.

"Aye. I heard him cry out and ran to see what was wrong," muttered Gilbert as this point in the writing was reached. "There the servants found me and at the orders of Robert locked me in the dungeon."

But Sir Florian, being hale, in spite of his sixty-five years, refused to die, the confession continued, and it was necessary to bring into the case one Dr. Jacques Morand of Paris, whom Robert called the greatest surgeon in France but who was in reality a rascally drinking companion of university days.

There was little more. The duke expired in spite of all Dr. Morand could do and the latter departed for Paris after having received a really staggering fee from the new pretender, Gilbert in the

meantime having been duly convicted of murder and incarcerated in Avignon prison.

WITH the confession in hand and the still chattering chemist between them, Gilbert and Dorothy appeared at Plessis-les-Tours palace the next morning to wait upon the king.

It was only after long debate that they had decided to enter the "spider's nest" bristling with watch-towers and guards, where Louis XI, the "terrible king," was making a last desperate fight against a loathsome disease.

Gilbert was for riding back to Orthow, raising a levy and laying siege to the castle. But Dorothy pointed out that Louis, who had obtained nominal sovereignty over the province the year before, could make Robert's position absolutely untenable if he fastened blame for the murder upon him. As usual her counsel prevailed.

Evidently they still were ahead of the news of Gilbert's escape, because the monarch, learning the heir of the Duchy of Mecklenberg (and a likely-looking wench at that) was waiting to see him on an affair of importance, received them in his bedchamber.

The ungainly monarch seemed feeling better than usual. He had not bothered to don the gorgeous raiment under which he still tried to hide his infirmities from the eyes of foreign diplomats.

Instead he greeted them wrapped in the dirty gray cloak which he had worn when he prowled about France in his younger days, and with the old felt hat, from which dangled the leaden figure of a saint, pulled well down over his eyes.

His keen, piercing eyes and long hook-nose gave his grotesque face the appearance of the head of a bird of prey, but his rickety legs, extended straight before him

as he sat in a heavy padded chair, disclosed his weakness.

"Come forward, my lady," the king said in his most honeyed accents as they entered. "To what do I owe this visit from one of my newest subjects?" His eyes approvingly swept her slim figure in its masculine disguise, for Louis, until the day of his death, was not above appreciating a well-turned limb.

"I regret the necessity of appearing before Your Majesty in this unseemly garb," said his visitor, curtsying deeply, "but it is a matter of life and death which can not delay." And she told her story and produced the confession.

As Louis read, his long, lantern-jawed face clouded with fury.

"Damme," he cried, his voice cracking with age and anger. "There shall be much hanging in my duchy of Orthow, if I be not mistaken. And who are these," he demanded, appearing to look for the first time at Dorothy's companions.

When he learned and heard Morand's stammering confirmation of the confession, his majesty did not hesitate.

"Take this rat to the dungeons," he ordered, pointing out the chemist to the guards. "We will have him tortured at our leisure." Then from an astrologer who stood behind his chair in spangled robe and pointed cap, Louis took pen, ink, paper and his seal.

A few minutes later he handed to Gilbert the royal edict, which read:

"I, Louis, King of France, hereby decree that for the murder of his uncle and my loyal friend, Duke Florian of Orthow, the lands and chattels of Robert, pretender to the title, shall be declared forfeit, he shall be outlawed, and Sir Gilbert shall be named Duke of Orthow in his place.  
LOUIS, REX."

"Will you need troops to help you reconquer the duchy?" the king then asked Gilbert. "You have only to ask for as many of the royal forces as you require."

But Gilbert recalled that the king, ever

avid for new taxes, seldom recalled his troops when once they were quartered in outlying provinces; so he declined with thanks.

"None will fight against us when they learn of Your Majesty's decree," he explained, bowing low. "Black Robert is not loved at Orthow. Besides, I have only to ask for troops from Mecklenberg and they will be supplied without causing you such great expense."

Louis smiled crookedly as he measured the new duke of Orthow with his cunning little eyes, but he nodded and let them go.

**O**NCE more in the open country, Dorothy showed no haste to return to Orthow Castle.

"There is time enough," she temporized when Gilbert wanted them to spur forward. "Let news of the king's decree precede us. Then we shall not be in danger of being thrown into prison at every crossroad.

"And besides, life is sweet," she sighed, her usual merry smile vanishing, "and there is so little of it left for me—for all of us. Let us idle along under the blue sky and forget our high destiny for a while."

So idle they did, sometimes wandering far afield when blossoming hedgerows beckoned, or spending long hours in the sunshine lying under the trees and talking idly of everything in the world.

Gilbert was continually amazed at the wide experience and knowledge of the world which this chit of a girl seemed to have. She told him of old campaigns, the gay cities of Spain and Italy, and the famous personages of a bygone generation.

"How did you learn all this?" he puzzled.

"From my father, who fought in the wars," she would answer lightly, and go on to some new picaresque tale which made him roar with laughter.

At night they would stop at the jolly French inns and carouse a bit with the wandering adventurers and friars and country people whom they met there.

Sometimes there were sly glances cast at Dorothy's slim figure in its hose and jerkin, but that was only at first arrival. For she drank the Rhenish wines with the best of them and shouted the rollicking songs of the day in a passable tenor until no doubt remained in the mind of anyone present that she was the spoiled son of some important nobleman. Eventually she became the center of any group they chanced to meet.

And when the night was far gone she would draw the slender sword she always wore and extol its merits to any who might yet be able to listen. A Spanish blade, she said it was, made in Toledo. Its like never had been seen in France before, although a century or so later it was destined to replace the clumsy two-handed swords which had been the weapon of the country since William the Conqueror hewed his way through Hastings.

"Ah, she is a graceful wench, my Toledo blade," Dorothy would croon, bending the long, needle-sharp thing between her slim white hands. "None can stand before her."

Sometimes she would induce a wandering swordsman to fence with her, almost always to his discredit, for the rapier slipped in and out between thrusts of the heavier blades with uncanny ease.

At first the girl handled her weapon somewhat clumsily, though with understanding, like one who was trying to force forgotten muscles into a well-remembered task. But as the days passed she began to show an almost uncanny aptitude.

As he stood in the drafty taproom while Dorothy and some puzzled opponent stamped and lunged inside a circle of shouting yokels, Gilbert marveled continually.

Here was a girl of steel, defying all the conventions of the time, when women were supposed to be helpless, fainting creatures who spent their days drawing mournful music from harpsichords or doing fancy-work in the quiet of some protected gallery. By all the rules he should have abhorred this hoyden who told screamingly funny risqué stories, liked her wine and treated him as a companion rather than a lover.

But he could not but admire her. The adoration which he had felt for the Dorothy of other days, before she had broken his heart by succumbing to the wiles of his handsomer, courtlier cousin, was that which an acolyte feels for a saint. This burgeoning passion which he felt now was something greater, and, he was sure, much finer.

But Dorothy would hear none of his talk of love.

"Enough time for that," she would reply, "when we have settled with Robert of the Black Heart, who spurned me for that Italian wench, the daughter of Count Guzzi. Such an alliance, he thought, would add more power to his duchy. We shall see.

"For the present you and I are friends only, Gilbert—two youngsters having a gorgeous jaunt through the springtime."

She looked at him closely, strangely, as if about to confide some secret, then shook her head.

"Ah, Gilbert," she continued, "you will not understand, but in the days to come remember I once told you that though the soul is sexless I do love you as a flower loves the sun. But for the present there is work to be done and God knows what thereafter."

She steadfastly kept their relations on a platonic basis. They rode together, drank together, once fought together when a gang of cutthroats waylaid them. At night they quite often slept in the same

room, for accommodations were scarce. But, according to the old custom of the Crusades, Gilbert's sword always was laid between them.

And always she ignored his growing passion and tried to interest him instead in the efficacy of her long, vibrant rapier.

"For see," she explained, "your clumsy weapon is obsolete. It was fine for hewing through armor in the old-time jousts, no doubt. But my lady will slip between the joints of the finest chain mail with one-tenth the effort."

Gilbert shook his head stubbornly.

"A fine weapon for a girl, especially when she insists on going about the country in man's clothing," he admitted. "Quite fitted for a woman's strength. But I will have none of your knitting-needles. I want a sword that sings and will cleave a man to the breast-bone if need be."

"Aye, if need be," she mocked him, her pretty nose in the air. "But don't forget, my dear duke-that-is-to-be, a man will die just as swiftly and with much less mess if he is jabbed properly through the heart."

**D**BLAY the journey as she would, the pair at last arrived on the outskirts of Orthow. News of their coming had, of course, gone before, and the peasants flocked to greet them.

Robert, they said, still was at Castle Orthow, swearing he was innocent and that he would hold his territory at all costs. But his troops, although they feared him too much to mutiny, would not lift a hand against the rightful heir, everyone was agreed.

"But why doesn't he escape to Italy, where he would be given sanctuary in Florence at least?" Gilbert wondered.

"Robin run away?" cried Dorothy. "That show's how little you know him. He is a scoundrel but never a coward. Robert knows we come alone. He thinks

if he dispatches you enough scapegraces will rally to support him so he can defy King Louis, especially if he can induce Count Guzzi to aid him. Well, he still has me to reckon with!"

"You will stay out of this," said Gilbert sternly. "My cousin is the best swordsman in France, since my uncle's death. I will not permit you to draw that silly weapon against him."

"Oh, very well," she sighed humbly. "I only hope he doesn't kill you, for he is the better swordsman. I'll come along to see that some of his scoundrels don't stab you in the back. Better get some heavy armor at the next village."

And, with an effrontery which made all his subjects devoted slaves from that day forth, Gilbert and his companion rode straight toward the gates of Orthow Castle.

It loomed, menacing and vast, against its snowy alpine background as they approached. The sun, although it was an hour before setting, had a dull luster which lighted the countryside with a reddish glare. Not a breath of wind moved. Not a bird chirped.

Evidently they were expected, for as they arrived the drawbridge was lowered and a single rider came slowly across the moat.

It was Robert.

"Good even, cousin," he said, a crooked smile showing under his dark mustache behind the lifted vizor of his helmet. "I suppose you have come to kill me.

"Good even, Lady Dorothy," he added, bowing over his horse's mane. "I hoped to see you in seemlier garb and in better company."

With those words his mighty sword came rasping from its shoulder scabbard. He spurred his horse forward. Gilbert did likewise. They met with the shock of an earthquake, sparks flying in the dim

light as their weapons clashed. Both stood in their stirrups and hacked with a will but with little effect.

Then, as his horse, unaccustomed to such encounters, shied widely, Sir Gilbert received a buffet on the side of the head which sent him tumbling headlong. Luckily he was close enough to catch Robert around the middle as he fell and drag him to earth also.

Unhurt, both men leaped to their feet and resumed the conflict.

Dorothy, apparently unconcerned, also dismounted and stood outside the range of conflict, leaning on her sheathed blade.

The lurid light glinted on the armor and straining eyes of the combatants as they shifted ground, their spurred heels cutting the sward into shreds and sending up little puffs of dust.

Quickly it was borne upon Gilbert that he was no match for this demon in black. Again and again he just managed to evade a thrust or slash from the five-foot blade.

But he always claimed it was dew on the grass which brought his defeat. At any rate Robert feinted for the head, reversed, and, as his opponent staggered wildly in an effort to meet the new form of attack, drove his blade through the left shoulder. In the fading light the wound looked heart-high, but in fact it was not fatal, due to the fact that Gilbert had been almost on one knee when struck.

Without emotion Robert looked at his fallen foe and wiped his sword carefully on a handful of grass.

"I regret very much, my lady, that you should see this dirty work," he said, drawing his poniard, "but one needs must finish a task thoroughly. The varlet's throat wants slitting. If you will turn your face away——"

He did not finish. Leaping forward, Dorothy struck him across the face with the Spanish blade.

"Have at thee, Black Robin!" she cried,

"He who can not finish his work without a dagger had best hide himself in hell."

Robert laughed loud and long. "How now, my lady? Wouldst match thyself with the greatest swordsman in all France? But how the devil," he cried, his voice changing, "did you come by my uncle's sword?"

Without reply the girl lunged, the point of the rapier aimed straight at his heart.

Although off guard, Robert managed to deflect the blade with the hilt of his sword, receiving only a scratch.

"Well taught," cried the girl, her voice shrill with the joy of battle. "Now try this one!" She went from *carte* to *terce* and when he parried widely returned to *carte* again. But Robert was too quick. She only pinked him.

"Splendid!" she jeered. "Duke Florian taught you well when as a boy he loved you and your black curly hair. Remember those long hours of practise in the courtyard. The duke trained you for a gallant life, Robin, but soon you will be worm-food the same as he.

"'Tis a pity you thought so much of your great sword that you would not take his advice and change it for a blade like this," she continued a little later. "See, you could have spitted me then had you a nimbler weapon." She leaped back and laughed at him.

Black Robert was perspiring and furious. Giving over his slashing tactics, he endeavored to match her fencing with lunges from his clumsy blade. Only his great strength made the thing possible, but he handled the twenty-pound sword as though it were a toy.

"Quick and brilliant, is it then?" cried the girl, leaping forward once more, a slim arm extended backward, the other keeping her weapon vibrating like a humming-bird's wing. "Very well, my charming rascal. Quick and brilliant it shall be.

Do you remember that time attack which the old duke tried to teach you, but which you were just a little too clumsy to master properly? Let us try that."

Seated on the red sward, just outside the circling feet, Gilbert stopped his effort to staunch his wound and watched.

Stung to madness by Dorothy's words, bleeding from half a dozen slight wounds, Robert fell into her trap. As she thrust and lunged he did not parry, but endeavored to time her attack and deflect the point on the guard of his sword while his own point held steady to meet her as her body followed the lunge.

Then Gilbert saw a display of swordsmanship which in later days he delighted in telling of to his children and grandchildren. The speed with which the girl lunged was like that of light. Too late her adversary made that snap of the wrist which was supposed to catch the point. By a fraction of a second he lost. His blade flashed past her breast, never touching her, while her own went inside his guard and through him, heart-high and extended half a foot between his shoulder-blades.

Robert did not fall at once. He merely coughed slightly, and, as with a sharp tug Dorothy drew the blade away, a look of horror such as Gilbert had never seen in the eyes of man dawned on him.

"Who are you?" he whispered through a bloody foam which had crept to his lips. "Only one man in France could have done that to me—and he is dead." He swayed, but braced himself as he stared at her with eyes that started from their sockets. "Are you? You are——"

"Aye, Robin, thou ingrate, thou shouldst have taken warning," the girl answered softly, almost tenderly. "Did I not say I—would—return?"

Then, as the dying man, with his eyes still fastened upon her, crumpled slowly to the ground, Dorothy laughed.

A great burst of laughter it was, higher-pitched but otherwise exactly similar to that which had made the dead Duke of Orthow famous throughout all France—mocking, debonair and unafraid of God or devil.

In the midst of that laugh Dorothy suddenly clutched her breast, reeled, flung out her sword to steady her. The frail metal bent into a bow against the sod—snapped. . . . She fell face downward upon the dead body of her foe.

The sun, which had been a great red simitar on the horizon, sank from view.

Gilbert staggered to his feet, his wound forgotten. Picking up the girl, he ran toward the open drawbridge.

Occupants of the castle, who had fought for places on the turrets to watch this strangest of battles, rushed out to meet him. As he fell fainting from loss of blood they caught the girl from his arms.

**D**OROTHY was not dead, although life fluttered within her as lightly as a butterfly's wing.

Even when Gilbert, his arm in a sling, was able to be up and about she lay, hardly breathing, staring at the ceiling of her chamber with great, dark eyes which seemed to be looking into far places and seeing unearthly things.

Gilbert watched over her day and night as she slowly gained strength. But it was not the daredevil hoyden who had ridden with him twice across France that finally returned to health.

Neither was it the fickle, soft girl, who at the beck and call of her mother had made tapestries or drawn mournful music from the harpsichord.

This was a woman, strange, quiet, unearthly beautiful, who in later days was the despair of painters—a woman who gave the impression of having seen things which the living should not know, and of having learned secrets which made existence somehow unimportant and a trifle ridiculous.

She never spoke to Gilbert of their adventures together, seldom spoke at all unless it was necessary, but showed a sweetness and steadfastness of character which endeared her to the nurses and in time to all Mecklenberg and Orthow.

History says she and Gilbert finally were married by the good Father Bellaire and that later she bore many strong sons.

But as he sat before the fire on winter evenings, stroking the head of one of his fine dogs or merely staring idly into the flames while his wife rested with crossed hands beside him, thinking of God knows what, Gilbert would sometimes feel bitter tears rising to his eyes. For, after all, she was not *his* Dorothy.

