

GOLDEN FLEECE

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LORDS OF THE TIDELESS SEA by H. BEDFORD-JONES

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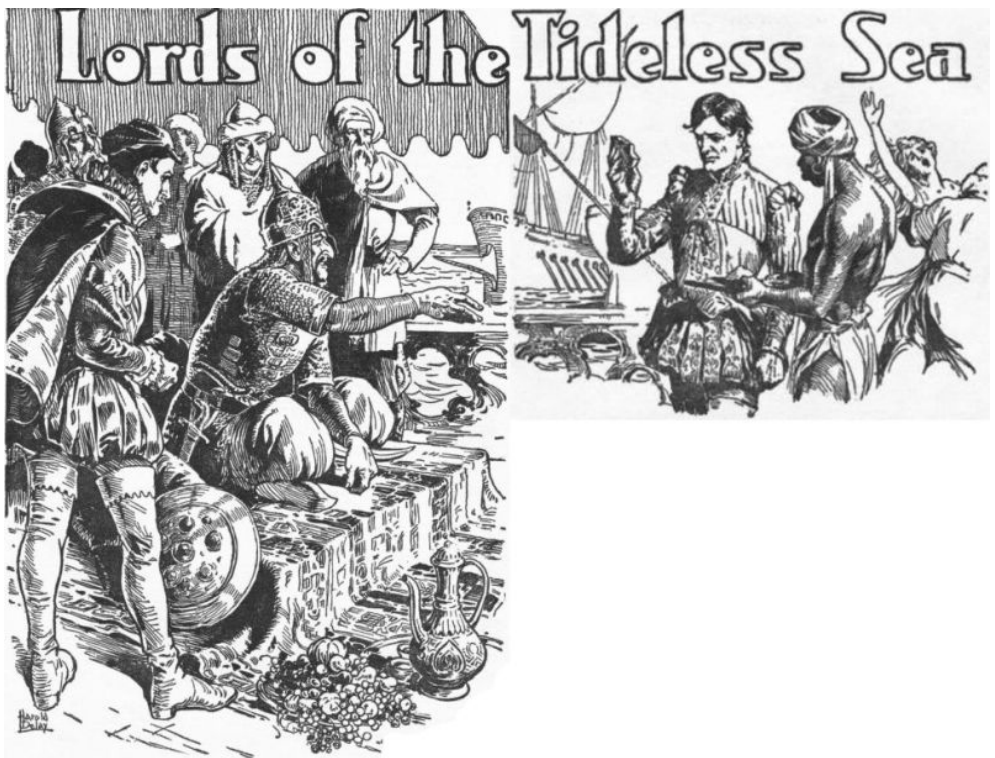
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“Eat,” ordered Curtogalli. Devries looked hard at him. “Eat? Poison perhaps?”

Lords of the Tideless Sea

by
H. BEDFORD JONES

Illustrated by HAROLD S. DELAY

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CHAPTER I

It was on the road from Rome to Naples. Against the roadside hedge of unclipped, wild-sprouting young olive trees, sat the hurt man, watching with proud fierce eyes those who passed. Not many, this morning.

Messer Angelo Bardi, of Florence, was one. He rode down the way with his two servants and his sumpter mules; he dealt only with rich things and great people and was a proud, lusty man, very quick at killing. He saw the hurt man and laughed.

“Ha! The swarthy rogue has fallen foul of bandits!” said he. “Well, I have business in Naples before the *St. Christopher* sails. Ride on! We can do him no good.”

Their dust lessened and fell quiet in the sunlight.

The hurt man, who was indeed swarthy, ripped at his already torn garments and made a clumsy bandage for his bleeding thigh. He had numerous wounds, but the thigh was the worst and most painful. He rose and tried to hobble on, toward Naples.

He was well and powerfully built, a soldier to the eye, but dark of skin. The bandage gave way and he sank down again, cursing. He saw another dust, and waited.

Here came the Countess Alix of Forli, with her three laughing demoiselles, and a dozen men-at-arms for guard. They clattered along with the baggage animals trailing, and chattered gaily of Naples and the voyage to Sicily, where the countess, wealthiest woman of Italy, had wide estates.

Lovely was she and lovely were her demoiselles as they talked and laughed; slim rich-gowned bits of fragrance made flesh, agleam with jewels, and the four would have delighted any four men in Christendom, in this happy year of 1516. The captain of the guard would have halted; but one look at the hurt man, and the countess cried out swiftly:

“Halt not! He looks like a rascal; let him be. None of our business if hurt men litter the highway. Besides, he seems to be a Moor, and that were bad luck.”

A Moor he was, as his Arabic curses testified. He looked after the gay company, and his fierce eyes were bloodshot with angry threat; but they went their way, and their dust lessened and was gone in the morning sunlight.

Presently, in the heat of the morning, two sorry hackneys came along the road with one rider. The lead horse gave off a faint banging and clanging, for he bore a load of armor; no very fine armor either, but looked as though it had seen hard service. The rider was bareheaded—a wide, powerful man in faded green travel clothes of English cut. His features were too square and angular for masculine beauty, but strong enough for any need. On his high jackboots were the golden spurs of a knight. The sword, lashed on top of his armor, was a long, straight, heavy beam of steel.

He drew into the roadside, halted his horses, and looked down at the Moor from gray eyes very direct and unafraid.

“Do you need help?” he asked.

“So it seems,” said the Moor, half defiantly.

The rider dismounted; once on his feet, he suddenly bulked large, heavy in the arms and shoulders, thin in the waist. His movements were light and deft. From his saddle bags he took leather bottles and other things needful, talking as he did so.

“Assassins?”

“Bandits,” said the Moor.

“The same thing. Italy is full of them. I was raised to soldier’s work, but never saw as much killing in my life as in the three months I’ve been here. The time’s not been wasted. I’ve learned a bit of Arabic, and now that the corsairs are swept from the seas and it’s safe to travel. I’ll go on to Rhodes. Devries is the name, Sir Roger Devries of England.”

“I am Mahmud ibn Khalid.”

“A Moor, eh?”

“Formerly of Granada, in Spain.”

“You don’t look that old. It’s twenty-four years since the Moors were expelled from Spain, in 1492. You don’t look over thirty.”

“I’m closer to fifty. You are English, eh?”

“Aye. Going to take service with the Knights of St. John at Rhodes.”

“The deadly enemies of the true faith, by Allah?”

“Well, we say the same thing about you Moors of Spain.” The gray eyes of Devries twinkled. The two men smiled. “Come, stretch out! That’s a bad cut in your thigh, but I have skill with wounds. First, some of this wine?”

Mahmud dissented. “Thanks; my religion forbids.”

Devries worked well, washing the wounds with wine and binding them up. Two ill-assorted men to be found on an Italian highway; but all Italy was ill-assorted in this day. Leo X of Rome fought France and Spain, made peace and fought again, and the world belonged to whom could plunder best and kill fastest.



He looked down at the Moor from gray eyes very direct and unafraid.

Most dreaded name in all Italy of recent times was that of Curtogalli, the Barbary corsair, who had established himself at Bizerta on the African coast. With all the aid of the Turks behind him, Curtogalli raided far and terribly. Not yet had the Black Death come to decimate the world. Italy teemed with humanity, and Curtogalli sent slaves to Stamboul by the thousand. But now, it was said, the Genoese had finished him for ever.

“There; now rest a bit, eat some bread and cheese, then I’ll mount you behind me,” said Devries, and sat down. “You have muscles of iron! What’s a Moor doing in Italy?”

Mahmud ibn Khalid smiled. “I was in Rome on business, with a safe-conduct, and last night started for Naples, where I have friends. I was alone, not dreaming of peril. Well, look at me now!” He laughed harshly, fiercely. “A fine plight for a soldier!”

“Bah!” exclaimed Devries. “Fortune of war, comrade. When I was coming through France, some peasants caught me in a forest. They had me actually hanging to a tree before they discovered I was not a French noble, and then let me go. It’s true, I killed a dozen of them,” he added with some satisfaction.

The Moor laughed. “At sea, you and I may be enemies; but I think we’d make good friends, comrade. I’m in your debt; I don’t forget my debts. Do you need money?”

Devries, munching the cheese, shook his head. “No. I have enough to reach Rhodes. I’ve already paid passage on the *St. Christopher*, which leaves Naples in a few days, now that the seas are safe for travel and that accursed Curtogalli is dead.”

“Eh? Who says he’s dead?” demanded the other. Devries shrugged.

“Everyone. The Genoese expedition has destroyed him by this time.”

“Allah forbid!”

“Eh?” Devries frowned. “What have you, a soldier and a gentle knight if ever I saw one, in common with that pirate and slaver and arrant rascal?”

The Moor laughed. “He and I both believe in Allah. Our people war on Christians, as Christians war on us. You, for example, go to fight us.”

Devries grinned sourly.

“No argument, comrade. Who’s this Curtogalli, anyway? Is that his real name?”

“Merely a *nom de guerre*; I understand that his story is similar to my own. Once wealthy, now an exiled wanderer. All due to your fine Christian Spaniards. There were no Barbary Corsairs until we were expelled from Spain and made homeless men.”

“So I’ve heard,” admitted Devries, sourly. “And now you make every coast of Europe pay dear!”

“Why not? Wouldn’t you do the same, if we took your country and expelled you?”

“Aye. Damn your arguments!” Devries broke into a laugh. “Right or wrong, what matter to me? Facts are facts. I’m a wanderer myself. Fighting your damned corsairs offers me a home, a future, a cause. If men like your Curtogalli didn’t make war on women—”

“Ah, there’s an argument for that too!” said the Moor, white teeth flashing in a smile. “We send all young women to Stamboul. There they go into harems to breed more men to fight Christians! The Janissaries are all former Christian slaves, or sons of Christian folk. Some of our best fighting stock comes from this source. The two Barbarossa brothers, with the red beards that gave them name . . .”

So the talk went on, a bit merry at the surface, but grave and deadly beneath. Roger Devries liked this Moor, divining in him a fine soldiery man, a splendid comrade had not fate denied. And Mahmud ibn Khalid felt likewise about the Englishman.

“It is a pity we must be foes,” he said. “Were this not so. I’d offer you a share in a venture I have afoot, a great and splendid venture, one that will crack the world apart! Christians are in it with me; that was my business in Rome. However, you’re not the man to be tempted by wealth and fame to share in anything that would go against your conscience.”

Devries gave him a hard, straight look.

“You’re right. And you’re a man of the same sort; otherwise, you’d not recognize it in me. So you’re going to crack the world, are you?”

“Wide open,” said the Moor gravely.

“Luck to you, then! You’ll do it like a man, if I’m any judge. Shall we go?”

He got the wounded man into the saddle, mounted with him, and set the horses to the road, his armor jingling behind.

To Devries, this Moor was a potential enemy, but he was also a man filled with knightly emprise, with chivalry, with high and powerful character. Cruel, yes; all the world was cruel these days. Who gave mercy, got stabbed in the back.

Life in these lands bordering the tideless sea was very cheap, and death lurked everywhere. At such a game, Roger Devries was the proper man to hold up his own end; his sword-blade, three fingers wide, and his powerful shoulders told this, and most of all his gray eyes and rugged features.

At the gates of Naples they shook hands and separated, the Moor going to an inn close by. And Devries, at least, never expected to see the other man again in this life, except perhaps some day over a sword-edge.

CHAPTER II

Now Devries had to wait some days before the *St. Christopher* finished her lading and was ready to sail, but he was not alone in this.

She was a stout ship, a *nef* of four masts; the two forward masts were square-rigged, the two after spars carried lateen canvas. Her master, hearty Messer Aldino of Genoa, laughed long and loud when Devries mentioned corsairs. All Naples laughed; indeed, all Italy was laughing with relief, and saying the same thing with zest.

“Three months ago, sir Englishman, Curtogalli carried off five hundred people within twenty miles of Naples itself, and thousands more down the coast. But now, as we speak, what’s happening?” Messer Aldino rubbed his horny paws. “That accursed pirate is being destroyed, is no doubt dead now. The whole fleet and army of Genoa are at his lair of Bizerta. The coasts are free, the seas are clear!”

This was truth. The depredations of Curtogalli had passed all bounds. Genoa had poured forth her might, with French assistance. The corsair’s base at Bizerta was being wiped out; he and his fleet with it. Italy was safe again. A carrier pigeon had brought home word, brief but sure, that Bizerta was taken.

This fact accounted for the goodly company aboard the *nef*. With Curtogalli raiding there was scant travel of lone ships. Now that all was safe, those who had delayed their voyages took heart to risk the seas. Devries, who had anticipated getting any kind of a ship and poor company, was astonished and delighted by what he found in reality.

The *nef* herself was a big ship, of full nine hundred tons; she carried guns and crew, a couple of hundred soldiers, crossbowmen, bound for Sicily, and many passengers, merchants and others.

Of these, a good score were women, wives and families of officers. Then there was the Countess Alix of Forli, with her three demoiselles, going to her Sicilian estates. Dear God, how beautiful they were! All of them golden-haired, slim, laughing, richly gowned. Devries stared his eyes out at them. He had worked up in a hard school of camp and field, and neither knew nor wanted the accomplishments of a lady’s man.

Then there was the Florentine merchant. Angelo Bardi, head of the great Bardi trading house with branches everywhere. A man neither young nor old, a lusty arrogant man with shrewd eyes and a nimble tongue whose meaning was never quite certain. He was just from Rome, and knew all the rich and great of the land intimately. Devries did not fancy him; too smooth, too affable, too potentially dangerous. He had heard some queer hints about this man Bardi, during his stay in Italy, and dark hints too.

Still, it was something to be ship-mates with such exalted company. Devries sought out the officers and soldiers, who were Genoese mercenaries for the most part, and found them even less to his taste. A ruffling, swaggering lot, more intent on wine and women than any soldiering; also, they disliked Englishmen and said so bluntly. So he left them alone.

On the morning the *nef* sailed, Devries was standing by the rail watching the boatmen when the three demoiselles of the countess suddenly surrounded him. Laughing, jesting, they dragged him back to the poop-deck, where Countess Alix sat beneath a sun awning, and presented him. In her white satin gown she looked like an angel, and he was struck dumb by

the rare delicate loveliness of her. She laughed merrily, and Messer Bardi, who stood at one side looking on, chuckled to himself.

“What, Sir Englishman!” she exclaimed gaily. “Have they no tongues in your land?”

“Not when beauty strikes them dumb,” said he, and felt proud of the fine phrase. But she laughed again, and pointed to the gay silken cushions.

“Come, come, sit down and be at ease! Here’s a lute. You shall strum me a madrigal, like a good troubadour.”

Devries flushed. “I’m not a troubadour,” he blurted. “My only lute is three inches of broad steel. I can play that, but with fine ladies and silken things, I’m awkward.”

“You are,” she said disdainfully, and dismissed him, with some anger.

None the less, her eyes followed his wide-shouldered figure, and so did the eyes of her merry demoiselles. And so, after a little, did Messer Angelo Bardi, who came up with Devries at the lower rail and stood in talk. He laughed heartily over the incident.

“The countess,” he said confidentially, “is a pretty thing, but life has been too kind to her. Her ancestors were fighting men.”

“She’s all right,” said Devries. “I’m no courtier.”

“Be glad of it. Courtiers are plenty, honest soldiers few.”

With his keen deft face and quick eye and tongue that shrank from nothing, Bardi could be pleasant when he so desired. He was a friend of princes, too. Leo X, who ruled in Rome, was a Medici, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent of Florence; Bardi knew him well. Devries perforce was courteous, and when they fell into talk of corsairs, as all travelers must who dared the sea, he broached the argument put forward by Mahmud ibn Khalid—though he said nothing of his meeting with the Moor.



"I'm not a troubadour," he blurted, "My only lute is three inches of broad steel."

Bardi listened and nodded thoughtfully.

"It rings true, Sir Englishman. Many Spanish Moors were very gentle knights and learned men and wise scholars; they were swept out into exile ruthlessly. They took to the seas, since Barbary offered their closest refuge, and vengeance. I've met more than one of them—bitter, cruel men, though they've harmed me not."

"They've pillaged your goods, at least?"

Bardi laughed. "No. If this ship were taken tomorrow by Barbarossa or Curtogalli, I'd be quite safe."

"I'd like to know why," grunted Devries, who did not like the man by half.

"Because I have a safe-conduct from the Sultan himself, like many a good trader these days. And it is respected by the corsairs, with reason. A fifth of all their booty, and most of their slaves, go to Stamboul. So I'm safe enough."

"Hm! I prefer this safe-conduct," and Devries touched the sword he was wearing now. He nodded toward the Genoese crossbowmen down the deck. "Or those."

“Every man to his own taste,” said Messer Angelo Bardi, smiling. “Perhaps you’re right. Now that Curtogalli is rooted out and destroyed, Rome is safe.”

“Rome, safe?” echoed Devries, astonished. “Rome, mistress of Italy, was never in danger from those rascally pirates.”

“Little you know.” Bardi leaned on the rail, spoke softly. “Why, Rome’s a hotbed of intrigue and plots. Leo is a fat pleasure-seeker, no soldier. Still, she’s center of the whole Christian world; haven’t you heard the ugly rumors?”

Devries shrugged, and glanced across the water at Naples and the lessening hills. The *nef* was on her way at last, men tramping the deck, canvas filling to the breeze, the sea ahead.

“Rumors? They’re nothing to me,” he said curtly.

“Facts would be. To you and the whole world. The Crusaders took Jerusalem; what if the Turks took Rome and destroyed her, as the Vandals did a thousand years ago?”

“Are you serious?” Devries frowned at the Florentine.

“Quite. Such a project was actually on foot recently; and, I heard, it was engineered from within Rome itself, by certain great men who hate the Medici pope. Curtogalli was the man to do it, sailing up the Tiber and planting the Crescent over the ruins of the Vatican. That’s why the expedition against him was pushed. Now he’s dead or sent in flight to Stamboul, and the danger’s gone. But it did exist.”

“I don’t believe it,” Devries said bluntly. “No honest men would betray their own city and people to infidel pirates.”

Bardi chuckled and fingered his smooth, strong chin.

“My good knight, when men become rich and great, they cease to be honest.”

“Not the right kind of men,” said Devries. He put meaning into the words, put all his dislike of the man into them; and Bardi, flushing slightly, went his way.

Roger Devries scowled after him. Rumors, eh? Plots, hatched within the dissolute circles of Rome itself—ah, it was good to be at sea and away from Italy! He disliked Italians. Assassination and treachery were too common here for his taste.

He looked aft at the Countess Alix and her three pretty demoiselles, and sought an empty corner of the deck, to sit and eat his own coarse provender. Noon was past, and the *nef* bowling along on an even keel, standing down the coast.

Devries longed for the day, soon to come now, when he would be aboard a war-galley, with work to do and blows to give. His armor was below in his cabin. He had learned Arabic—at least, had learned to speak it fairly—as part of his preparations; he was eager for the life ahead. The knights of Rhodes maintained warfare, day and night, year in and year out, in protection of Christian ships.

It did not occur to Roger Devries that many a person aboard the big *nef* might find in this voyage a ploy of destiny that would alter lives and characters and all the future, and wipe them out of the world.

The afternoon was half over when the three little sails were sighted. They stood in between the *nef* and the coast-line. Genoese galleys heading north, said Messer Aldino the ship-master; perhaps bearing fuller news of the destruction of Bizerta and the corsair Curtogalli.

They were, most certainly, galleys, with oars aflash in the sun, making the standard galley-pace of three knots an hour. There was no sea running, and the rails of the *nef* were crowded

with watchers as the three galleys drew closer. Sharply, a seaman sent down a shout from aloft.

“Corsairs, master! They answer no signals, and they have cannon!”

Consternation and amazement swept the decks. Corsairs, infidels? Impossible! The seas were swept clean of corsairs. Yet the laughing women fell silent and anxious. Messer Aldino reassured everyone that it was impossible, that alarm was needless. Genoese galleys carried cannon.

None the less, the ship-master fell desperately to work. He whistled up all the crew, broke out gunpowder, loaded the cannon, and served out arms. A trumpet blew, and the crossbowmen formed up amidships.

Devries eyed the three galleys, now a scant quarter-mile distant. He eyed the Genoese officers, the alarm sweeping the decks into panic. He saw that the galleys were now sweeping around a trifle, and spreading out. Grimly, he went below, got out his armor, and buckled it on. He had just finished, when an outbreak of shrieks and hoarse cries brought him up to the deck in haste, and he saw the reason. The leading galley was suddenly black with armed men, had run up the green flag of Islam, and her oars were spurting. All three were circling to come at the *nef*. A gun spoke, and another.

They were long, low craft, quite narrow; that the stout *nef* should fear them, standing high above them as she did, seemed fantastic. But it was a fantastic moment. Devries watched with a curious sense of unreality. Time stood still; upon him rushed an overpowering visual acuity—a sharp and awful clearness of mental vision, a momentary flash of terrible perception.

Corsairs, yes; the yell of “Allah!” was enough. Men fanatic, who lived to fight, who fought with reckless courage and welcomed death; and here, down these decks, hurried panic, inefficient action, craven hearts that thought only of safety. In this flash of perception, he knew what the end must be.

Then everything changed, reality swept back, and he was himself. The leading galley blossomed with white smoke, and her guns roared. Down the decks swept death, wild shrieks, men rolling and blood spurting. Devries went to the officers of the Genoese.

“Can you use me?” he said.

“Good God, messer knight!” burst out one. “Take command!”

“Very well.” Devries wasted no words. “Post your men along the bulwarks to take cover. Hold fire until I give the word. Let Messer Aldino work his guns. Cover! The bowmen in two ranks.”

He had never fought at sea, but his calm demeanor heartened them; they obeyed. He stood beside the tiller. Arrows were flying in air, striking all around. A din of yells came from the galleys as they closed in, with roll of drums and trumpets all ablare. “Allah! Allah!” lifted the shrill uproar of voices, as the three low ships swung and swept in upon their prey.

Guns belched. The pierieres of all three galleys let go—wide-mouthed guns, belching fifty pounds of broken stone to a charge. Grapnels were flung, caught, held.

“Fire!” ordered Devries, staggering a trifle from shock as an arrow shattered on his breastplate.

Along the bulwarks, the Genoese uprose. Crossbows twanged and twanged again; the bolts hurtled into the crowded masses of men below. The yells became screams and shrieks. But the galleys clung there like leeches. Men chopping at the grapnel-lines were picked off. The Genoese paused to wind up their crossbows; brown faces, helmets, axes, uprose along the

bulwarks. Messer Aldino was down with an arrow through his eye, and panic seized the shipmen. They broke, abandoned their guns, disorganized the Genoese. More and more brown faces came clambering up. The yells of “Allah” were on the deck, now.

Devries, in sudden ghastly dismay, realized that his first meeting with the corsairs of Islam was turning out badly. And he could do nothing about it.

Now it was hand to hand, clumps of Saracens on the deck, swords out. Devries bared his sword, swung the heavy blade, and strode down into the midst of it. The heavy steel clashed and clanged. They broke before him. Weapons struck him and glanced. Brown fierce faces, white faces of renegades, went reeling in red ruin from him.

He knew he was fighting, however; these men gave him grim work. Now uprose a mailed foe, an Arab or Moorish knight, heavily armed. Weapons clanged anew, the Moor, with the thirsty sword half through his body, fell away. Devries strode on. An Arab, fierce and eager, leaped out before him. Men gave back. Here was a corsair of note, obviously. His curved scimitar struck and slashed, but the big sword met it squarely; Devries pushed up, breast to breast, struck suddenly with the sword-pommel, and as the Arab staggered, cut sideways. That man died, and others rushed in.

Of a sudden, Devries realized the unwelcome truth that he was alone. Panic had seized the Genoese, as fresh corsairs came tumbling over the rail. They broke before the wave of desperate fighting men, they lost heart, they fled.

Devries, warring on, found himself ringed in. He backed against the rail and fought on stubbornly. He was unwounded, though many a weapon had given him bruises through the good metal. Then a stone struck his helm and dizzied him. His sword wavered and fell; an Arab leaped for his throat. He killed that man, but the weight unsteadied him. He lost balance, his foot slipped with blood on the deck.

He was down. With a terrific crash, a mace struck his helm; it stunned him, left him unconscious for a minute or two. No more, but enough.

He wakened; now he was alone among the dead and hurt; with an aching head, securely lashed hand and foot. His whirling brain cleared. The fight had swept away. It had all lasted scarcely ten minutes; purpose and efficiency winning quickly over half-hearted measures.

As he sat, propped against the bulwark, he stared dully along the deck. It was thick, now, with men of all races—renegades, Arabs, blacks, Turks, Moors. The crew and the Genoese were being slaughtered to a man. “Allah!” lifted triumphant yells. “Allah! Curtogalli! Curtogalli!”

Devries groaned and closed his eyes. Curtogalli was dead, destroyed—yet these corsairs must be his men! It was past understanding. He drooped wearily, mind and body.

Silence, comparative silence, ensued; then a burst of voices close at hand. He looked up. A warrior in Persian chain-mail, a renegade with red hair and blue eyes, was directing a number of men. The killing had ceased, the bodies were being tossed over the rail.

“Leave that one with the golden spurs!” cried the renegade. “A knight. He is mine, for ransom. Hurt him not!”

“Aye, Rais Hassan,” came the chorus. Rais—that meant captain, thought Devries dully. Captain of one of the galleys, no doubt. They swept away from him. Dead and dying were tossed over, Moslem and Christian alike. Those who could care for their own wounds, escaped.

Some came and stared at Devries, but not many. Attention was soon diverted, as the prisoners came pouring up from below—women, infants, passengers, fugitives. Devries, well up on the higher poop deck, had hideous view of everything. Most of the men were killed at once. A few of the younger were stripped and sent down to the galleys, to replace slaves who had died at the oars. Screams resounded; they were drowned by bursts of laughter from the corsairs, whose jests flew fast.

Devries jerked up his head, as Messer Bardi appeared. Rais Hassan and two other commanders, examining each who came, heard his rapid speech, listened to him, examined his papers. He was released.

“By Allah, you are lucky!” said Rais Hassan, grinning. “Go down to my ship as a guest; Curtogalli will welcome you.”

“Curtogalli!” exclaimed Bardi, who spoke Arabic fluently. “But he is dead!”

A roar of laughter greeted this.



He lost balance, his foot slipped on the deck.

“Not yet,” said Rais Hassan. “We gave Bizerta to the Genoese, and came north to make a fair exchange. Off with you!”

The Florentine, somewhat shaken by this information, went his way.

Curtogalli, eh? Devries wondered. The corsair was said to have a score of galleys, six or seven thousand men at least. Giving up Bizerta to the Genoese, sailing north to strike at the undefended Italian coasts—

Then Devries groaned a little and forgot everything else, as Countess Alix and her demoiselles, no longer laughing, came on deck. She was separated from the three, and brought before Rais Hassan and the two other captains. What she said, Devries could not hear; but she was cold, disdainful, arrogant. Then the voice of Rais Hassan lifted.

“You need to learn your lesson. A Christian is less than a dog; you have no more value than your worth in the slave-market.”

He struck her across the face, then put out his hand and tore the white robe from her. She stood among them all, unclad, shrinking, alone. Rais Hassan ripped at her robe, dabbled it in a pool of blood on the deck, and flung the fragments at her.

“There, woman; take it. Soon you’ll feel the whips on your white skin—ha! In the name of Allah, what’s this?”

Sudden diversion broke in, laughter, screams, shrieks. The three demoiselles had been seized and snatched away. Rais Hassan, in towering fury, had them led up, and the men who had taken them.

“They are for Curtogalli to give, not for you to take!” he said to the men, and motioned his warriors. “Kill them!”

Those men were cut down on the spot. The four young women were taken down to the galley of Rais Hassan. The latter beckoned one of the other captains.

“Take what men you must have, and sail this *nef* to Stamboul. Your galley with her; stop near Messina and fill her with slaves. These other women? Bah! They’re not worth taking to market. Let them be shared among your men.”

He came down the deck to Devries, and halted, speaking in the lingua franca that was understood everywhere along the tideless sea.

“Ha, sir knight! You go to Curtogalli with us. Your fate is in his hands. Will you give your knightly parole until we reach him, tonight or tomorrow?”

“Yes,” said Devries.

He was put on his feet, freed, stripped of his armor, and sent down a ladder of rope to the galley alongside. As he went, the clamorous laughter of the corsairs dinned up to the sunset sky, and the shrieks of what women remained aboard there.

And thus, for Roger Devries, the old life ended and a new began; and not for him alone. The prelude to adventure was done.

CHAPTER III

Darkness, and sobbing women. The laughter of the demoiselles was done.

With the four of them, Devries was shoved into a tiny cabin aboard the galley, given a bowl of food, and left to merciful obscurity. For a while silence reigned. The galley tossed abominably. From the oar-benches in the waist came the steady creak and groan of oars and men, the undeviating, monotonous pound of the drum that set the time, occasionally the crack of a whip and a screaming cry.



He tore the white robe from her.

“Still silent, Sir Englishman?”

Devries turned to the soft, huddled figure beside him. Her hands fluttered at his hurt head; to his astonishment, he found her washing off the blood and bandaging the split scalp with a

fragment of her tattered gown. His heart warmed toward her. She, at least, was not sobbing like the others. Her ancestors had been fighting men.

“Sweet lady, what words would avail us?”

“None. You are right,” she replied. “We are going into hell. Not you, perhaps.”

“Comfort.” He seized her little hand and pressed it. “I give you thanks. If I might, I’d offer you devotion and service.”

She laughed bitterly. “What you refused this morning, you’d give now?”

“When you most need it, sweet lady,” said he, and his soul swelled within him for aching love of her. “When hope is least. Aye!”

“You’re a strange man,” she replied, a break in her voice. “What do you lose? Home and family, friends, rank, position?”

“I’ve little to lose,” he said frankly. “I’ve earned my spurs among fighting men. Behind me is nothing. Since I was fifteen, I’ve been with armies. I’m no courtier.”

“So you told me this morning.” Her fingers fluttered on his face like a benison. “What service can you give me now? I am lost, less than nothing, a chattel. Ah, God! That one day should bring such changes! Perhaps it’s punishment for my pride.”

“I give what I can,” he returned. She sighed.

“Good. I accept, then, in humility. If you had a dagger—”

“For yourself? No, no!”

“For that fiend in human form, Curtogalli!” she broke in with a catch of breath.

“No,” he said again. “Wait. There may come a time, a chance. See, sweet lady, I give you my whole devotion and service from this day forth! Wait, and trust.”

“You talk like a monk,” she answered bitterly. “Trust! Whom?”

“Me,” he rejoined. “And God.”

She made a little scornful, inarticulate sound, and said nothing more. But Devries, when he sank into the slumber of utter weariness, still clung to her slender hand.

Once, toward morning, he was wakened by yells. The cabin had one tiny window, less for air than for sight, and he rose to it. The oars were stilled, motion had ceased. Looking forth, as the galley swung he caught lights near at hand. At first he thought they were in some harbor. Then he saw the lights were bobbing, not fixed. A voice from a number of seamen at the rail reached him.

“Only twenty fathom, they say; make the anchor good and fast. Allah is with us! Ten miles at sea, and only twenty fathom! Just let the weather hold fine and—”

The voice died, the men moved away. Devries sank down again.

Ten miles at sea! Since the *nef* was taken, the galley had continued north. She must, then, be a bit beyond Naples; not in any port, but ten miles at sea. Those lights? Other galleys. Probably a score in all. Anchored off the Italian coast, then; the whole fleet of the corsair Curtogalli. Why?

Apprehension gathered in Devries; the words of that Moor on the highway came back to his mind—a venture that would crack the world apart! What, then? Had it something to do with Curtogalli? Perhaps. That wily corsair had let the Genoese fleet and army go to Bizerta, capture his base, do what they like; he, meantime, had doubled back up the coast of Italy with his sea-wolves. Why?

Messer Angelo Bardi, somewhere aboard here, and his rumors about Rome captured and destroyed. Ah, nonsense, nonsense! Such things could not happen in the world. It was all wild gossip. Curtogalli was here, however, doubtless to raid and get away again.

“And I’m here,” said Devries to himself, unhappily, as he fell asleep.

With morning, came food and action. Ordered on deck, Devries found two other craft bearing down, and fenders being put out. The sea was like a millpond, smooth as glass, with scarcely a swell; Curtogalli and another were coming aboard. He did not need the talk of those around to know that the splendid galley bearing down to larboard was that of Curtogalli. The craft spoke for herself. Painted all pure white, with oarblades gilded and brass cannon aglitter, she looked more like the pleasure craft of some princely seaman than a pirate galley. An awning of brilliant hues shaded her after deck.

No less curious was the second craft, coming in on the starboard side. A galeasse, this, a larger craft using both sails and oars, with the rowing benches decked over and high forecastle and sterncastle at either end bearing heavy guns. The flag of Venice blew at her stern; instead of the galley’s enormous lateen sail, she carried three masts and with her higher sides was a veritable fortress. Obviously a prize, for the Lion of Venice was everywhere aboard her—flag, bulwarks, stern, high prow—and her three slanting sails were worked with the Lion and the Cross.

Rais Hassan came down the deck, saw Devries, and approached him with a grin.

“Talk ransom to Curtogalli, sir knight, and talk your best!”

“I have nothing,” said Devries. “There’s none to pay ransom for me.”

The renegade drew down his shaggy red brows in a scowl.

“If that be true, by Allah! you get chained to a rower’s bench!”

“Perhaps,” said Devries. He was minded to fight and make them kill him, rather than accept fate meekly. But he had given his parole until he faced Curtogalli. A smile grew in his eyes as he faced the renegade. “Was it you who struck me down yesterday?”

“Aye.” Rais Hassan surveyed him. “Why do you ask?”

“To know where the debt lies.”

The other laughed. “So? You’re a slave now, not a soldier. And before you’re chained to the rowing bench, I’ll give you a hundred lashes to break your spirit.”

“That time has not yet come,” said Devries. “What will happen to the Countess Alix?”

“Oh, the haughty wench? She’ll go to the Sultan as a gift.”

“Foolish waste of good money, Rais Hassan. Send him another.”

“Eh? What mean you?”

“She’s said to be wealthy. Ask Messer Bardi. You might ransom her at high price.”

Rais Hassan whistled. “Ha! Say you so? It’s worth a thought; but Curtogalli may say otherwise.” The renegade’s face darkened, and a French oath came to his lips. “That dog-brother needs a lesson or two himself, and may get one yet. Well. I’ll lighten your chains by way of gratitude for the idea.”

He went hurrying away with a blare of orders, as the two other craft swept in alongside and lines were flung, to make them fast.

Devries felt a little prickling up his spine—a thrill of hope, of comprehension. This Rais Hassan had been a Frenchman, then, before he turned Turk. And he did not love Curtogalli; hated the commander, in fact, if his face were any criterion. For all his cool imperturbable mask, Roger Devries had set his brain at work, and he had one. He was dealing with men now, with soldiers, and meant to catch at any straw that offered.

There was the Florentine now—Messer Bardi, stopping for a word with Rais Hassan, coming on aft to the rail where Devries stood. He was smiling, composed, shrewd.

"Ha! Good morning to you, Englishman. You fought well yesterday, I hear."

"Did you?" came the blunt question.

"Fighting's not my job, sir knight," Bardi rejoined affably. "Let me advise you to make friends with this Rais Hassan. He's a far more capable man than Curtogalli, I hear."

"He seems to think so," said Devries. The other chuckled enjoyably.

"Aye, true! It's nothing to me; I'm in no danger. But I'd hate to see you chained to an oar for life."

"In that case, you might pay my ransom and save me from it," Devries said with some irony. Bardi looked down his nose.

"Ha! I fear that's impossible. But," he added, lowering his voice, "you and I might yet turn a deal with Rais Hassan. Would you be willing?"

"I'd be willing for anything with honor," said Devries.

"Admirable! Curtogalli has played a shrewd trick on the Genoese; now he means to raid the unsuspecting coast, and get away. There's a price of fifty thousand golden ducats on his head. A share of that, and freedom—eh? Mind you, it's no easy task. They say he's a superb swordsman—"

Devries scarcely heard the smooth voice. The words did not reach him. He was suddenly absorbed in what he saw under the awning of the galley alongside. He caught at the Florentine's arm.

"Aye, of course, I'm willing! But look—isn't that Curtogalli himself? It could be no other. And fully armed!"

"They say he's never unarmed while at sea. Aye. That must be our man."

That awning, that after-deck, was close beside them; every detail stood clear, and the details were gorgeous. Over the deck was spread a superb Turkish rug. A number of black slaves stood about, bearing dishes and trays. The corsair, obviously, was sharing the morning meal with his lucky captains. Several of these surrounded him, some armed, some not, in a blaze of jewels and weapons. All a setting, it seemed, for the central figure.

Seated cross-legged was Curtogalli. Little could be seen of his swarthy features; like Rais Hassan, he affected a Persian helmet with long nose-piece and dangling chain mail that fell about cheeks and neck; but his helmet was studded with jewels. His body was covered with a long chain-coat, heavily gilded; across his knees was a long scimitar, the curved blade naked, the hilt a mass of coruscating gems.

"They're coming for you!" exclaimed Messer Bardi abruptly. "Leave all to me, and anger them not. We may yet have luck—"

He hurried away. Between the two galleys had been placed a gangway over the rails amidships. Two men were coming, intent upon Devries, ordering him along; others were smashing into the cabin to get the Countess Alix. Devries followed without protest, and found himself aboard the white galley. He was led aft, into the crowd about the corsair chief.

Rais Hassan and the other captain stood in talk before Curtogalli, as before some king. And the voices that rose were tense with anger.

"So you sent Rais Ham'illah away with the *nef* you captured!" said Curtogalli. Devries could just follow the Arabic words. "Why, you fool, you fool!"

"By Allah! Not even you can call me fool!" cried Rais Hassan furiously.

"Let me prove it." Curtogalli laughed, and the laugh was harsh. "We need every ship we can get, for slaves and booty here. Your orders were to bring in any ships you found. You get a

big one, and send it to Stamboul! Send it to pick up a few hundred women and children down the coast—when it should have been filled with treasure, with all the treasure of Rome, with children of the greatest Christian families!”

“Rome?” faltered Rais Hassan in obvious amazement.

“Aye.” The voice of Curtogalli became metallic, staccato with anger. “Rome! I tell you now, I tell all of you, what our errand is here. We plunder Rome itself! Within four days, the loot of Rome will be ours!”

There was a moment of stupefied silence. Then a bursting yell arose—a yell so fierce, so exultant, so wildly frenzied as it spread along the decks, that the amazed Devries could not repress a shiver. These wolves, let loose on the imperial city!

“But—but—that is impossible!” exclaimed Rais Hassan. “We have a scant six or seven thousand men in all. Rome is not on the sea. It has strong walls—”

The voice of Curtogalli silenced him in scathing accents.

“We have swords, Rais Hassan, and a leader! And I’m the leader. I’ve made all arrangements. The city will be ours at the first assault—even without an assault, if all goes well. Rome—ours without a battle! You need not understand. I’m not telling my plans yet. Well, after all you’ve made a good capture; Allah bless you! Now let us see these women.”

Countess Alix was led forward. Her three demoiselles were kept a little back. Curtogalli eyed her intently, and Rais Hassan spoke to him quickly, eagerly. The chieftain shook his head.

“No. I will not ransom her. She shall be a gift to the Padishah, the Sultan Soliman. A woman of rank—good! She will please him. Ransom? Bah! All the wealth of Rome shall be yours to pick from, Hassan. Keep her aboard your own ship; you shall be responsible for her safety and well-being—to the Sultan himself, mind! If you fail, you’ll be put on a stake in the Stamboul market. Send her away.”

The Countess Alix, understanding nothing of what was said, was led away by two men. She caught the eye of Devries, and he made a gesture of reassurance, as she disappeared.

“These other three?” Curtogalli looked at the demoiselles. “Let them serve her? No. We’ve no use for servants, when every ship will be crowded with slaves from the greatest of Roman families! Give these to any who wants them. Who’ll have them?”

“I,” spoke out Hassan quickly. “One of them—the little one.”

“Take her, then.” Curtogalli sank back, laughing. “Who next?”

A clamor uprose. Hassan strode to the demoiselles and picked up the youngest in his two hands, grinning widely; two other men seized upon the remaining pair, and their shrieks died quickly away.

“Now,” said Curtogalli, “bring up the others—who? Oh, yes. The Florentine. And the Englishman who fought so hard. Where are they?”

A knife pricked Devries forward. Messer Bardi joined him. They stood before the corsair, at the edge of the carpet. Curtogalli was eating some fruit from a tray that one of the blacks handed him, and broke off to stare at the two men. Then he leaned back, laughing heartily to himself, and beckoned.

“Florentine! Come hither,” he said in Italian. Something in the words, in the accent, in the voice, plucked vaguely at the memory of Devries, as Messer Bardi took a step or two forward. “So you have a safe-conduct from Stamboul itself, eh?”

“Yes. Here it is, Rais,” and Bardi produced a scroll.

“Good. You are safe; but you must go to Stamboul with me.”

“What?” Bardi turned livid. “To Stamboul? Why is that?”

“To answer charges against you. A week ago, as you rode to Naples, you passed a hurt man on the highway. Did you help him? No. Instead, you told your servants to ride on, that you had business in Naples. But that wounded man, Messer Bardi, was one of the Enlightened, one of the Faithful, a True Believer. A Moor. And because you did not help him —”

Bardi broke into frenzied protests. Curtogalli munched his fruit and laughed. Those around laughed. At a word and a look from the chieftain, one of the black slaves came to Devries, and presented it to the astonished Englishman. It held bread and salt.

“Eat!” ordered Curtogalli. Devries looked hard at him.

“Eat? Poison, perhaps?”

“No, bread and salt of hospitality.” Curtogalli reached up and removed the jeweled Persian helmet, and laid it aside. He smiled at Devries. “I shall pay your ransom, my friend; you are as my brother. Eat! It is the law of Islam, if you eat my bread and salt you are under my protection—”

Dazed, uncertain, stupefied with the recognition, Devries obeyed and ate. It had taken him all this while to realize that Curtogalli was the Moor he had helped on the highway, Mahmud ibn Khalid of the wounds.

CHAPTER IV

"My friend, you shall be set free, unharmed, with the finest weapons and garments and a rich purse," said Curtogalli. "But not now."

"I don't want your garments and money; the weapons, I'll take," said Devries sturdily. "But what about Countess Alix?"

"Don't mention her again. She goes to Stamboul."

"Let her free, ransom her; take me instead."

At these words, Curtogalli turned grave, astonished, probing eyes on the speaker.

The morning was wearing on; the three ships still clung together, the rest of the fleet remained anchored around. Curtogalli and Devries sat alone beneath the awning.

"Are you serious? You can't be such a fool! Chivalry of that sort is folly," said the Moor. Devries shrugged.

"I mean it. I am devoted to the service of that lady, while I live."

"So?" The other smiled, his white teeth flashing. "Well, in that case I may reverse myself. We'll see. There are greater women in Rome who'll please the Sultan."

Devries laughed a little. "Now I'm the one to ask if you're serious."

"Yes, as Allah lives!" The swift fanatic light in the dark eyes leaped high. "The plans are made. That's why I was in Rome—I, Curtogalli! What did I tell you? A venture that would crack the world wide open? This is it."

"You must be mad to think of it," said Devries sternly. "Not sixty thousand men could conquer Rome!"

"Six thousand fighting men are worth sixty thousand cravens. Mine fight." The corsair was all aflame now. "Mad? Not a bit of it, my friend. Today, this very day, the pope leaves Rome and goes to his seashore villa at Padiglione. This afternoon, I go there in the galeasse of Venice, openly; she will arouse no suspicion at all. Many ships put in there for water.

"Tonight we land and seize Leo of Rome. The galleys come in, we push up the Tiber, straight for Rome itself. Even if my friends there fail to deliver the city, we hold the pope. We trade him for Rome; at worst, we assault. Blood and fire! Before any force can gather, we're gone, and Rome is sacked."

Devries, listening with a soldier's ear, felt a cold chill grip at him. Here, he perceived, was no boast at all, but careful planning. He knew that Leo X spent much of the summer at the seashore, and this fact made the wild dream certain to succeed. If Curtogalli held the pope captive, Rome was his; the city would be in blind, mad panic. And not all Rome could muster a thousand men to fight with the reckless deviltry of these corsairs—to fight as fought the damned.

"Aye," he said slowly, grudgingly. "You'll win. Seize the pope, and you must win. But you were wounded! How can you act as you must?"

The Moor shrugged. "The wound's healing; I can get about. A soldier, as you should know, isn't stopped by mere wounds. Only by death. But now I must leave you until later. All the captains are coming aboard for a meeting with me, and discussion of plans and orders."

He rose, and went on quickly, smiling:

"You're free to do what you wish, go where you like. See the Countess Alix, if that pleases you. No one will offer you harm, for you're known to be my guest now. And if you choose to

accompany us ashore tonight and then go free, you have but to say the word. We'll see, later."

So saying, he strode away, giving no indication of his recent wounds. Devries looked after him, eyeing the fine soldierly figure with lowering gaze; a corsair and pirate the man might be, a follower of Mahound, a hater of all Christian things, but he had a touch of fine chivalry, of generous warmth, none the less.

"If he were anything but what he is, I'd love him!" thought Devries. "But as it is—ah! I have no choice."

None, indeed. Curtogalli himself had voiced words that now lingered in his mind with terrible echoes. This man could be stopped by only one thing: Death.

Matching the Moor's generosity with his own, Devries had been tempted to utter impulsive warning about possible plots, having in his heart the words of Messer Bardi. Now he was glad he had not. For, with gloomy but stern conviction, he saw that nothing but some such chance stood between Curtogalli and a reeling Christendom struck to the heart by a vital blow.

He sat there watching the boats come in from the other galleys. He saw the captains come aboard. Rais Hassan, the French renegade, and the master of the Venetian galeasse came over the rail from either side, and trooped below with the rest, to the meeting that would decide the fate of half the world.

For, to Roger Devries, destiny showed clear portents. Dissolute, treacherous, weak, Rome might be; but to the whole world she was a symbol of greater things. Leo X might be a sorry ruler, a plump white-fingered pleasure lover, but he was pope. Let Rome lie in stricken ashes, and the whole Moslem world would be fired to fresh conquest, to new wars. The pope a captive, Rome sacked—aye, Christendom might well reel! And these things, incredible as they were, fantastic and unthinkable as they were, would happen within three days.

An officer, a lean brown Arab, came up to Devries with a smile.

"Lord, our master gave orders that you might select what weapons pleased you from those in the armory."

"Later, thanks." Devries came to his feet. "Have you any wine?"

"None, lord. It is forbidden by our faith."

"Then send me a slave with some food and water, to take to the woman aboard Rais Hassan's galley. I have permission to visit her."

The Arab assented readily, and a black arrived to follow Devries. The Englishman was only dimly aware of the tremendous change in his own fortunes; he was no longer a Christian dog, he was now a friend and guest of Curtogalli.

He paid scant heed, however, to the smiles that met him, the eager words of greeting, the courtesy on all sides. He was troubled by his own problems, and groaned within himself as he crossed to the galley of Rais Hassan.

There, he was taken to the cabins without demur. As he gained them, two slaves passed him, carrying between them a slim stark thing draped in golden hair. It was the young demoiselle who had been given to Rais Hassan, and there was a dagger buried to the haft in her bosom. The two others, perhaps, had encountered a less easy release.

He encountered Messer Angelo Bardi, who came eagerly to speak with him, but Devries would not.

"Later," he said, putting aside the Florentine. "First I must have word with the Countess Alix."

So he came to her. The black left his food and drink; the countess, her cheeks streaked by the mark of tears, stared at him hard.

“What is it?” she gasped. “What is it? You’ve changed—”

“I’ve brought you something to eat, sweet lady,” said Devries, and sank down on the edge of the bunk. He passed a hand over his eyes. “I need help. I know not where honor stands. I—God forgive me, I don’t know what’s right! This Curtogalli is my friend. I saved his life, not knowing who he was. Now he’s set me free, and I think he will listen to my plea for you.”

“Then we should rejoice!” she exclaimed, with sudden hope and joy breaking in her eyes. “If this is true, we should be glad—but you’re not glad!”

“No, I am not,” said Devries. “You don’t know what’s about to happen.”

He told her, bluntly, all Curtogalli proposed to do.

In her face, as though in the face of the world itself, he saw mirrored the mixed emotions that would sweep over the earth at this news. Incredulity, horror, an appalled fear; not for herself, but for the destruction of the city that had been a symbol and a power for a thousand years redoubled.

“Rome!” she said, choking. “If Rome is taken, then the Turks will pour into Italy from every side—”

“Not into Italy alone,” he broke in grimly. “It means they’ll sweep over the whole of Christendom with an impetus nothing can resist. It means heartbreak and lost hope and weakness to all of Europe. It means a flood of fleets and corsairs raiding every coast in all Christian countries. And I could—I might—stop it.”

“You!” she gasped, wide-eyed. “You! How?”

“I don’t know yet. To me this man is courteous, friendly, unsuspicious; he would never dream that I would plot against him. Where lies honor?” Devries groaned a little in his mental anguish, and gazed at her from bloodshot eyes.

Gradually she comprehended what tore at him. And when she did understand, she smiled softly, tenderly, and took his hand, and uttered words that he would never have expected from her a day earlier.

“Dear gentle knight, what do little folks like us matter, after all? He is your friend, you say; what does he matter, either? Or your honor? You have to think of but one thing. Not ourselves, not Rome, not the faith in which we were bred; only of the awful untold suffering that will come upon the world, our world, if this man accomplishes his intent. Your country is far away, but it, too, will suffer.”

“Ah!” Devries lifted his head. “But I swore to you my knightly devotion; my heart seconds it, sweet lady. You are more to me than all the earth—”

A smile struggled again to her lips, though terror lay in her eyes.

“Don’t think of me; I release you from your offer. Your honor lies far beyond all that. If I could help you, I would. I’ll prove it if the chance arises. But think only of the one important thing, the one great thing, true knight!”

Roger Devries was in many ways a very simple fellow, seeing right or wrong as straight roads, with no curves. He was not used to arguing himself into any way that pleased him, with fine phrases and smooth words. In the words of this girl, however, he found a quiet earnestness that set his heart at rest.

He kissed her slim fingers, and, reassured and once more steady in his heart, went forth to find Messer Angelo Bardi, who was awaiting him anxiously.

CHAPTER V

It was high noon, and food was being served out.

Bardi, who had made quite the best of his own situation, led the Englishman into his own cabin, food was brought, and the two of them were left alone. Devries, unhurried, ate heartily and quickly.

“Well?” said the Florentine. “You know everything—the rumors were true. Where do you stand?”

“With you,” said Devries. “There’s no middle ground, Messer Bardi. What hope from Rais Hassan?”

“Ah!” Bardi caught his breath and spoke softly. “Every hope. Hassan wants to lead this raid on Rome himself. He’s been cheated at every turn. Curtogalli derided him and scorned him in public, before all the captains, for sending away the *nef*. The girl given him stabbed herself, before he could have his will of her. He’s furious, boiling inwardly, ready for anything!”

Devries smiled.

“So? There’s not much time to waste. Do you know the plan? The Venetian ship puts into shore this night. The pope is to be seized at his villa.”

“I know,” said the Florentine, his features working curiously. He, too, was somehow stricken by the thought of it all. “But remember, fifty thousand gold ducats is a lot of money to anyone! Even to Rais Hassan. If I give him a bill of exchange on my Stamboul branch for that amount, the thing is settled. It depends on you. Yes or no?”

“Yes,” said Devries promptly.

The other drew a quick, sharp breath of relief.

“Ah! I was in doubt. I had heard that Curtogalli welcomed you as a friend and brother—that you had eaten his salt—”

“Don’t be absurd,” said Devries, polishing the tray with a hunk of bread. “Ha! These Moors make good stew! So you don’t want to go to Stamboul, eh? Will Rais Hassan listen to you?”

“He has already listened,” said the Florentine darkly. “Most of the men aboard this galley of his will take his part; they’re from Stamboul, and dislike Curtogalli, who is a Moor of Spain. If Curtogalli dies, Rais Hassan becomes leader of the fleet.”

“Excellent!” said Devries, complacently. “You, with your talents, should be able to build well on such a foundation!”

Messer Bardi missed the sarcasm and appreciated the compliment blandly.

“The one trouble is,” he said, “that we need someone aboard the admiral galley for a certain purpose.”

He paused. Devries grinned. We! The word was eloquent. The whole project had been discussed, and some sort of plan made tentatively.

“I presume that much of the scheme must depend on the details of Curtogalli’s plan for tonight—”

“Which we’ll not know until Rais Hassan returns from the council. Then, we may count you in with us?”

“Conditionally,” said Devries coolly. “I want no share of the reward for Curtogalli’s head. I do want the release of Countess Alix.”

Bardi fingered his smooth chin. Obviously, he doubted such lack of self-interest. Devries read his expression aright, and went on quickly and shrewdly.

“Look you! There’s reward enough for me. You know her wealth. Eh?”

“Oh, I see!” The Florentine chuckled. “You’re not such a dunce after all! Yes, yes, it can be arranged. Let me handle the matter.”

Liar and rogue! thought Devries to himself. The man was false to the core. Let him handle it, let him promise anything—ha! Two could play that game. Roger Devries began to get interested in the business, now that he could see a bit into it.

A roar of voices came from the deck, the pound of hasty feet. In upon them burst Rais Hassan, livid with fury and chagrin. He burst forth in a torrent of French.

“Small time to talk. The galeasse sails in an hour—ha! The Englishman!”

“Is with us.” Bardi spoke rapidly, while the renegade stood glaring. “His price is the woman you hold for Stamboul; the Countess Alix. Grant it, grant it! She’ll be of no importance, once Rome falls to you.”

“I will not!” erupted Rais Hassan with gusty fury. “I mean to have her for myself. If this accursed Englishman thinks—”

“Come outside.” Bardi took his arm, and directed a sly wink at Devries. “The air is clearing, the coast is in sight, and if I point out one little fact to you, then you may change your mind.”

Rais Hassan let himself be argued out of the cabin, and the door closed.

Devries smiled grimly. He was not deceived by the Florentine’s pretence; he knew what that man was even now whispering in the renegade’s ear. Promise anything, anything! Later, the Englishman could be killed easily, once Curtogalli could not protect him. Use him, kill him, take the woman desired!

The two came back inside. Rais Hassan was all wreathed in amiability now; he wasted no words, but came directly to the point.

“Good! It is settled. You shall have the woman: I’ll set her ashore with you here. Now for the plans. Messer Bardi, there’s no time to lose! As I say, the galeasse sails in an hour, under command of Curtogalli himself, with a crew of picked men—we have enough former Christians to fill her decks and avert suspicion, while others remain hidden below. She goes direct to Padiglione and anchors in the port, about sunset. The villa of the pope is two miles from the town.”

Devries spoke suddenly. “Have you knowledge of the place?”

“Plenty of that,” and Rais Hassan laughed. “Some of our men are from the locality; my rowing master was born there! Not a strip of coast in Italy, but we have slaves or soldiers who know it.”

Renegades, obviously, had their uses.

“Curtogalli will take his men ashore, fifty of them, an hour before the dawn,” went on Rais Hassan. “He’ll go straight to the pope’s villa, attacking at dawn. There is to be no great retinue with the pope; merely a few friends and secretaries and guards. They’ll be cut down before they can get out of the gates, the pope will be seized. The others aboard the galeasse, hearing the signal shots, will then land and destroy the town. Curtogalli meets the rest of the fleet off the Tiber mouth, and pushes straight up the river for Rome.”

"Before he gets there," said Devries, "warning will have been given."

"But he'll have the pope in his hands, and panic will do the rest."

Devries nodded. A good plan; it could not fail. Especially with a few traitors in Rome itself. Rais Hassan turned to the Florentine.

"There's the plan, Messer Bardi. Speak up, if you've anything to say; I see no way of taking any action."

"But I do." Bardi laughed. His soft, persuasive tones rang with assurance. "For you, for us, the plan is perfect! It could not have been better had we ourselves arranged it!"

"In the name of Allah, explain!" burst out the renegade, impatiently.

"Curtogalli goes with fifty men to the pope's villa, leaving the rest to loot the town when the firing starts. He does not go there until nearly dawn. He does not attack until dawn." Bardi chuckled. "How many men have you aboard here?"

"Two hundred at the oars, slaves; three hundred or more fighting men. But Curtogalli takes no slaves on the galeasse. He'll have a thousand men aboard her."

"Let him, let him; it should not worry us, since they'll be at the town, and he'll be two miles away at the villa—with only fifty men!" Bardi laughed again, softly, confidently. "Here's your action, if you're the man for it. When night falls, leave here under oars alone—send the other ships to lie off the Tiber mouth. Head straight in for the coast. Before midnight, land with two hundred men, a few miles above Padiglione. You'll have men who know the roads and the country for guides."

"Yes, yes?" Rais Hassan was tensed, eager, breathing hard. "And then?"

"It's very simple. Assign fifty men to the villa and the pope. With the rest, lie in wait for Curtogalli and his fifty. You'll have three times their number, men all devoted to you. Ambush him; fall upon him and slay! He and his fifty will suspect nothing. At the same moment, let your fifty strike at the villa. You see?" Bardi made an eloquent gesture. "Curtogalli dies. You become admiral of the fleet. You replace him, the pope is in your hands, you carry out the rest of his plan, join the fleet, and strike at Rome! The city will be yours before sunset tomorrow."

Rais Hassan caught his breath. His fierce eyes glowed; he clawed excitedly at his red beard, a blaze in his face.

"Ah, ah! You have genius!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Each man armed with pistols or arquebus; ha! That accursed arrogant Moor will be blasted at the first fire, and easily finished! Yes, it's perfect. Perfect! What about this Englishman?"

His eyes leaped to Devries.

"He'll be with Curtogalli," the Florentine rejoined suavely. "We need one man there we can trust. Suppose the plans are changed at the last moment? We must know it. We can leave nothing to chance."

"Nor can I," growled the corsair. "Suppose he betrays us?"

Devries spoke up, coolly.

"You have sense, Rais Hassan; use it. I want the Countess Alix and her wealth. Curtogalli refuses her to me, is determined to send her to Stamboul. Well! Nothing else counts with me. You give her to me, and I'm your man."

The scowling features of the renegade cleared.

"Right. That arrogant Spanish Moor has hung himself; with me, with Bardi whom he intends for Stamboul, and with you, his friend, on account of the woman. His stubborn vanity passes all bounds!"

“Obviously,” said Devries. His firm, uncompromising mien was impressive. “You’ll come to the villa by some road from the north. Good. I’ll be able to warn you if plans are altered. It’s not likely Curtogalli will take me to the villa with him; if he offers, I’ll refuse. When you come along to the town, with the pope in your hands, I’ll raise the cry for you. Curtogalli’s men won’t know what’s happened until too late. You can take the galeasse and they’ll be at your mercy—they’ll have to join you.”

“You, too, evidently have your value,” said Rais Hassan, beaming.

“Look you, one last word!” put in Messer Bardi earnestly. “Remember this one thing; it’s all important, Rais Hassan. Whatever you do, don’t let the pope escape your hands! Who holds the pope, holds Rome. If he escapes you, any effort upon the city is useless. Grip him, and you have the city paralyzed, panic-struck, helpless!”

This was obvious enough. Messer Bardi, Devries shrewdly perceived, was giving good advice. Probably the Florentine had reasons of his own for hoping the mad scheme might succeed. Who holds the pope, holds Rome! True, doubly true. The success of the whole intent depended on this one point.

“Agreed, then. I’ll have a word with Countess Alix,” said Devries coolly, and rose. “Then I must rejoin Curtogalli. All’s understood?”

“Aye,” said Rais Hassan. “You’ll warn us of any change in plans? We’ll depend on you heavily for that.”

“I’ll do better,” said Devries. “Consult with your men who know the coast and the roads. Tell me where you’ll make your landing. I’ll slip away from the galeasse and come to meet you, either at the landing or on the road to the villa.”

“Excellent! Better and better!” exclaimed the renegade. But he exchanged one swift glance with the Florentine, and it gave away his thought to Devries. An easy matter to cut down the Englishman or slip a dagger into him, and have him out of the way.

“I’ll send you word before the galeasse sails,” went on Rais Hassan. “You’ll come to meet us, then; we’ll know definitely whether the plans remained unchanged.”

“Agreed,” said Devries, and left the cabin.

He went to that of the Countess Alix. An Arab on guard outside her door saluted him and stepped aside. Knocking, he walked in at her command, and closed the door.

“Well?” she demanded, staring at him. “Ah, God! You look so hard, so stern—”

“Bah! I’ve been lying my head off, and it disgusts me,” snapped Devries. “Look you! I’ve cast the die, win or lose. With luck, I’ll save the pope, save Rome, defeat this damnable conspiracy—but at a cost. Think well, and make decision, for I’ll do as you say! If I go ahead with it, I see no hope for us, for you, for me; no escape. I’ll make the effort, yes; some way may occur to me later. But I see none, to be frank, at present. Shall I go ahead or not?”

She stood white, stricken, eyes ghastly upon decision. Upon them dinned the roar of voices, of men at work and bustling, through the three ships. His blunt, forthright words drove into her with harsh emphasis. Her decision—for her to say! It came hard. She must damn herself and him; yet she must. She had no choice.

She came to him, put out her hands to him, and kissed him on the lips.

“There is my answer, dear knight,” she said quietly. “Be noble!”

Devries drew a quick breath. “That’s a motto worth the earning,” he said, and caught her to him. “If I can, I’ll come for you at sunrise, or before; at the worst, I’ll come to die with you. Be noble! Good words, hard words, brave words.”

He kissed her again, held her against him for a moment, and then went.

CHAPTER VI

The Venetian galeasse, crowded with men, forged slowly, steadily, toward the blue coast of Italy. She was not a fast sailer, but no speed was desired now.

Under the sun-awning on the sterncastle sat Curtogalli, Devries and certain of his chief men clustered around; he was very merry and eager, as were they all, with high adventure spurring them on. Only Devries sat in glowering silence.

Word had come to him as promised. Rais Hassan would land at a cove four miles north of Padiglione; his galley would wait there. The highway ran south from there to town, passing the villa of Leo X on the way—a high villa above the shore, walled and gated, marked by tall cypress trees. It could not be missed. It stood alone.

“Why so dour, Englishman?” demanded Curtogalli with a laugh. “You sit silent and your eyes are murderous. Not thinking of me?”

Devries looked up, and his face cleared.

“No, not of you,” he said with truth. He had been thinking of Messer Bardi of Florence. “Of a man whom I hope some day to kill.”

“Then you’ll need weapons,” said Curtogalli, laughing. “I’ve brought you the best we have; a sword better than your own, at least, for it was forged of Toledo steel, and chain mail to match. It’s all awaiting you below. Not that you’ll need it tonight, Allah be praised! You can wait here aboard the ship, until our business is finished.”

Devries nodded to this, without comment. To those around, Moors, Tunisians, Arabs, renegades, he was as an honored guest, a friend and brother of their master. Chivalry still existed; the hatred felt by Moslems toward Christians was not yet the bigoted, fanatic obsession it was to become a century later. And the knowledge that he was about to betray the friendship of Curtogalli, could not but render Devries gloomy; yet there was no other course.



“If I can, I’ll come for you at sunrise . . .”

The arms were brought; his eye kindled to the fine steel of the sword, to the fine steel links of the mail, and the light, strong helm. He accepted them with fitting thanks, but he took small joy in them or anything else. He was struggling with his own problem now—how to accomplish what he must do.

And slowly, surely, the answer came to him. The one thing he had overlooked, forgotten, taken into no account!

The sun went his westering way, the galeasse forged steadily on, the coast grew into blue hills against the sky, and Italy drew close. To the north lay Padiglione; the ship would strike it from the south, as though bound north to Livorno or Genoa. Sunset, said Curtogalli, would see them in the tiny harbor, no more than a cove at the river mouth.

And, as the time drew near, as a fishing boat or two broke the water horizon with brown sail, all traces of the corsairs vanished. By the hundreds, the eager sons of Islam filed below, with jests and laughter. Two small boats towed astern. On deck appeared a crew which to even an official inspection would assuredly be Venetian, or at least Christian. They were all renegades, men of every nation bordering the tideless sea, who had joined the corsairs for loot, if not for Allah; and they were carefully tricked out in Venetian costume.

Curtogalli, who disdained such disguise, remained out of sight in the cabin, whence he could give orders at will. Devries remained on deck, with a hooded cloak over his helm and coat of chain-mail. He had lost his gloom, now. Calculating his chances well, he was suddenly assured that destiny must serve him this night.

Sunset was at hand. The cove opened, the beach with its nets and boats, the little town built around the river-mouth. There was a great stir ashore as the galeasse headed in, but it

quickly died. Sight of the Lion of St. Mark and the Cross on the big sails gave reassurance and quelled alarm. Curtogalli laughed and beckoned two of his men.

"You're both Italians by birth—anchor off those fishing wharves, take one of the boats, and go ashore. Tell any story that suits you. All I want to know is whether the pope has arrived at his villa. Bring back the word quickly."

On this point of suspense, indeed, hung all the plans. If the conspiracy were well guided, if Leo X had indeed arrived as scheduled, then all was well. If not, Curtogalli must make other arrangements.

There was no need to send ashore, however. Barely had the anchor plunged down, than a dozen boats pushed out to come alongside, laden with fruit and fish and grapes to sell the Venetians. None were allowed on board, but eager barter took place, news was exchanged, voices rang high. And the corsairs, in gleeful Arabic, muttered among themselves and pointed out likely houses for sacking at daylight.

Presently the information came. All was well. The pope himself had come that day to his villa, and the town was looking forward to a season of prodigality and blessings. Curtogalli, dipping his hand in the dish—they were at the evening meal—grinned at Devries and the others around.

"So! Praise to Allah, all goes well. Tell them to sheer off, that we have sickness aboard. Tomorrow will be time enough—there'll be more news than they wot!"

Jests flew high and fast. But Devries, to whom this jesting over the fate of all Christendom brought little mirth, stood up, and Curtogalli understood his thought, as he spoke curtly.

"Give me a place to sleep," he said, "where I'll not be disturbed."

"Aye, comrade," said the Moor. "This is not your affair. Where you will."

"Then I'll curl up on deck in the stern. There's a pile of canvas by the rudder post. I'll not see you again until you return. May you have all the luck you deserve!"

"May Allah grant it!" said Curtogalli, and Devries went out.

Darkness was closing down now, the stars were out, all was quiet: but the corsairs down below stirred not. As he went aft along the lengthy waist, Devries heard the leaders discussing the orders. All hands sleep until an hour past midnight; then the shore party under Curtogalli would leave. The two trailing boats were in under the stern quarter.

But midnight would be too late for Roger Devries.

He made his place amid the pile of canvas, and stretched out, after removing helm and mailcoat and sword. Three persons entered into his problem: Pope Leo, Curtogalli, and Countess Alix. The end did not particularly matter, if he saved the first two from enemies and treachery. Fifty thousand ducats for Curtogalli's life—it revolted him. For himself, he had been too close to death all his life to worry greatly about it now. If he could do what was his to do, he could well afford to die with the Countess Alix.

Presently it came clearer in his mind. He rose and looked around. This high stern was deserted. The watch were all on the forecastle, closest to shore as the ship tugged at her anchor on the imperceptible ebb tide or current. A rope ladder had been put out in readiness. It was for him as well as for the others. Why not?

He seized the moment with its sudden thrill of a way opened. A rather simple, straightforward sort of man, this Roger Devries, unworried that the destiny of the world was hanging on his actions this night.

Haze in the air, high haze in the sky, nearly hiding the stars and darkening the water. Not a soul observed him or heard him as he descended the ladder and quietly laid his arms in the bottom of the boat. A large boat, designed to carry men ashore. He cast off the line, and the boat melted into the obscurity of the waters.

Once the galeasse was beyond his sight, he knew he was beyond her sight. An oar at the stern, and he dared to scull a little against the current, heading now for the few lights of the town. The shore drew nearer. The boat at last scraped the beach, and he stepped out to the shingle. Ashore, and free!

“Thank God!” he breathed, fervently.

Stooping, he sent out the boat with a long, strong shove, sent her swirling out and out. She would be found, later, when Curtogalli came to go ashore and missed her. It would forebode discovery of his escape, perhaps.



“Good evening, signores. I am come from the Venetian ship, and I desire a guide to the pope’s villa.”

He donned his helm and mailshirt, buckled on his sword, and fumbled in his pockets. Curtogalli had not been niggardly; gold coins clinked dully, and he got one out. Free! The realization dinned at him, filled his brain, coursed in his veins, as he made his way toward the lights. A tavern, there, with men drinking and talking.

He walked in and stood blinking at them, and they at him.

“Good evening, signores. I am come from the Venetian ship, and I desire a guide to the pope’s villa.” As he spoke, he showed the coin. Several men leaped up. Beckoning one who looked more intelligent than the rest, Devries was on his way in two minutes. The man plied him with eager questions about the Venetian ship, to which he answered little.

His guide rattled on. The pope loved sea fishing, and was going to spend much of his time out at the sport. He had commanded a boat for morning, in fact; whereat Devries smiled grimly to himself.

“There’ll be no fishing in the morning,” he said. “When we reach the villa, I’ll send you back with a message to the captain of the Venetian galeasse. Instead of fish, you’ll have corsairs.”

“Impossible! They are swept away—”

“They are landing at dawn. I go to warn the pope,” said Devries sternly.

His guide babbled with terror, but he heartened the man and questioned him. There was but the one road to the north, he found; he could not miss the galley of Rais Hassan.

It was not yet midnight when the villa appeared ahead and its lights showed that the folk were up and about. At the gates, a guard challenged.

“An English knight, from the Venetian ship in the harbor, to see His Holiness,” said Devries, and turned to the man. “Here’s your promised pay. Now go back, take a boat out to the galeasse, and tell her captain about guiding me here.” Devries had altered all his plan on the spur of the moment. Let Curtogalli know the truth!

“Tell him that Rais Hassan and a pirate crew are already landed in the cove four miles north, with intent to kill him and to surprise the pope—he will understand.”

“But, lord, how do you know this—”

“Never mind! Off with you!”

Devries was admitted to the villa grounds, on his plea of urgent news. Torches were lit. He strode forward to the steps, where a number of men came forth, staring curiously at him. That the pope was among them, he had no doubt.



"You've not a moment to lose; mount and ride for your lives!"

"I come with warning, signores," he exclaimed abruptly. "You've not a moment to lose; mount and ride for your lives! Corsairs are landed in the cove to the north. They intend to

seize the pope, if he be here, and then to mount the Tiber to Rome. Curtogalli and six or seven thousand men are at hand.”

“Curtogalli!” Voices of alarm broke out. “But he is destroyed—”

“He is not destroyed. He is close,” said Devries. “His whole fleet is bearing in toward the land. Ride for Rome and close the gates! There are traitors inside who are in league with the corsairs. Quickly!”

Warning enough. A sharp, imperative voice of terror leaped out, giving orders. Men began running to the stables, torches flitted, the group at the entrance scattered. Devries was forgotten, as panic took hold on all those men and spread like wild fire.

The pope saved from the trap, Curtogalli saved from treachery! As Roger Devries melted into the darkness, he felt a warm rush of confidence, of assurance, of joy in work well done. He had spoiled the great scheme of Curtogalli, but he had made amends by saving the Moor’s life; and he was more than satisfied.

As he looked back before the night swallowed up the villa, he was aware of a pound of hooves, of shrill alarmed voices, and knew that his work there was done. Now remained the sterner work ahead.

He faced forward to it, in the darkness.

CHAPTER VII

The road wound along the shore; scent of the salt sea, of olive trees and chestnuts, drifted along its course. The sense of loneliness increased unbearably. All sounds had died out behind, and the darkness made the rough road slow going.

Four miles of it. In those four miles, temptation tugged and swayed at Devries.

He had done his work. Curtogalli was warned. Rais Hassan would find the bird flown, the trap useless. The pope was spurring for Rome and safety. Why, then, go on to danger and probable death? Morning would bring safety, all enemies flown over the horizon. Why not await it? One woman more or less . . .

Devries strode on. A few days previously he might have entertained the thought, but not now. Those few hours aboard the galley with the Countess Alix had revolutionized all his ideas of her; he had gained an insight into her which left him astonished and fiercely jubilant. The woman, the one woman in all the world!

As for going to death, he would go to it gladly enough with her; but he was going to something else. All the future must march upon the events of this night. He wanted ten minutes aboard that galley, and the right man; then he would have a chance, at least, of success.

Rais Hassan, he figured, would be slow in learning that the bird had flown, that his trap had failed both victims. He would not get back to his galley much before sunrise, if then; a strange road made slow marching, as Devries was now learning. Yes, there would be a chance, a slim chance—

He halted suddenly. All his meditations went fluttering. From somewhere close ahead in the obscurity he caught a voice in Arabic.

“Ma’ash’ Allah! May the infidels who made this stony road rest forever in hell!”

Rais Hassan’s men! Despite his startled, poised alarm, Devries grinned at the words. The corsairs had come as they were, bare-footed; and this road was undeniably stony underfoot. So much the slower marching, then.

Swiftly, Devries shrank in among the brush beside the road. The company obviously had been resting. Now an order came, was passed along; they were taking the road again, unhurried.

“If that accursed English infidel has tricked us,” came the growl of Rais Hassan, “I’ll have him flayed and then impaled alive!”

“You can’t expect him until later,” came another voice. “This night is dark, the road strange. Mustapha has orders to await us?”

“Aye. He’s camped ashore, the galley moored to the rocks. Close up, there! Close up, everyone!”

Devries waited motionless, held his very breath. The odor of unwashed bodies came to him, a jingle of arms, the sluff-sluff of feet, low cautious imprecations. Almost within arm’s reach, the files of corsairs trooped past in the darkness. Still Devries waited, to give any stragglers plenty of time to pass.

Mustapha, probably the lieutenant left in charge, camped ashore with the remaining portion of the crew! That was good news. Guards would be posted, of course. There, all by

now! With pulses athrob, Devries stepped out into the road and hurried on, sword loose in scabbard, senses straining against possible peril. But none came.

How far had he come? Two miles, three—difficult to say. As he strode on, he sent his thoughts back, with deliberate effort. Yes, he could remember the overseer who had charge of the slaves at the benches. No soldier at all; work with the oars demanded specialized skill. A fat Turk and hairy, heavy with the lash, cruel beyond belief to the poor devils chained to the ash benches. The name—ah! Murad. That was it. Murad, and his brutal lash tipped with bits of lead. Murad!

In this man now lay all the hope of Roger Devries.

He went on watchfully, as fast as he could cover the stony road, poised to catch any warning from ahead. The time seemed interminable, the road endless. Waves, sucking at the rocks, sounded from his left; close to the water, now. Then he caught it—a low hum of voices, a stir, a confused sound of men.

Devries halted suddenly, so suddenly that his scabbard and mail-shirt clashed. A voice not three feet away spoke out.

“Eh? By Allah, who’s there?”

“Silence, fool!” muttered Devries in Arabic. “Is that you, Ali?”

“No; it’s Kaireddin.”

“Did Murad come ashore?”

“That fat capon? No chance. He’s snoring under the forepeak—”

The low voice ended in a gurgle, as Devries found his man; the gurgle died, as the shortened sword slipped home. Devries could take no chances now, could entertain no mistaken ideas of mercy with these wild beasts. He had come to grips at last, and death would take the slowest to strike.

The camp was a little way off; this man Kaireddin had evidently been a guard posted on the road. Knowing that discipline would be very slack, Devries was not worried over the absence of the man being noted. From his victim, he took a long dagger, with a grunt of satisfaction, then turned his attention to the shore and ship.

Great rocks studded the shore hereabouts. The camp, as he presently made out, was in a sandy niche among the rocks. Skirting it carefully to the left, he found that the rocky outcrop ended abruptly, beyond doubt in deep water, since the galley was drawn up slap against the rocks and made fast bow and stern.

He reconnoitered, weighing his chances as he made out the details in the darkness. How far the night had gone, he could not tell; it must now be well past midnight, at least. He found himself close to the bow of the galley, here. The stern, also moored to the line of rocks, was close to the camp; a mutter of voices came from there. Some of the crew might be still aboard in the high stern.

“That settles it, then,” he reflected. “I’ll have to stick to my first idea about Murad. Too bad! To cut her lines and let her go adrift in the darkness would be a splendid stroke; but it can’t be done by one man.”

Murad was asleep in the forepeak, the guard had said. Gaining the galley’s side, Devries found her moored with only fenders against the rock, so close that one might step to the rail. In the long, low waist slept the rowers, the slaves chained to their benches for life; the stench of them rose to him, the sound of their snoring, their groans, their restless stirrings.

The bow, however, seemed deserted. Next moment he had stepped aboard.

Now he was safe from notice or molestation; every man who could had gone ashore, except the one man whom he most sought, whom he must find. Not for himself, not for any speech with this Murad; but for that which Murad carried at his girdle, the badge of his office, the symbol of his rule. The heavy master-key which fitted the locks of every slave at the benches. Only death would part the Turk from that key.

Devries came to the narrow runway that entered the forepeak, and then halted. Murder a man sleeping? He could not do it. Besides, in that pitch blackness too many things might happen. All now depended on success at this one point; he dared not risk failure. He stooped, and sent in his voice.

“Murad! Murad! Waken, Murad!”

A growl responded, a sleepy word.

“Aye! What is it?”

“Rais Hassan is back. He wants you instantly.”

Another growl. A stir. “May Allah reward him with a century in hell! I come.”

After a moment, he came, a huge bulking figure stooping to emerge from the runway. Stooping, and coming erect no more; stooping, and plunging forward headlong to die on the deck as the dagger smote him. A sure blow, a true blow, a strong blow. Without even a groan, the Turk collapsed on the deck.

Devries knelt, rolled him over, and explored the massive shape. On the belt hung the key, by its chain; he loosened the belt, and had it. With a leap of his heart, he turned back toward the rower’s benches and gained the runway or planked walk that ran the length of the waist, between the benches.

Now, under his breath, he spoke softly.

“Is there any Christian man here?”

He repeated the question as he passed. A naked form stirred and sat up.

“Aye! Who asks? What is it?”

“Silence!” Devries halted, crouched. “Who are you?”

“Jean Leschamps of Marseille, or I was.”

“Will you fight if I release you?”

The slave caught his breath. “Fight? Aye, by God I will!”

“Careful, then—no noise! One sound, and we’re all lost. Were you at an oar when the *nef* was taken a couple of days back?”

“Aye. Ah! I know you now! The English knight who fought—”

Desperately, Devries covered the man’s mouth with his hand.

“Not a sound, I tell you! Let me do the talking. Reach over your irons.”

The amazed, bewildered Frenchman was freed. Devries crouched beside him and put the master-key in his hand.

“There are others who’ll fight?”

“Some, yes. Some are past fighting. Others would snitch to curry favor—”

“Do you know where the weapons are kept?”

“Yes. Forward.”

“Pick your own friends, men who’ll fight.” Devries spoke softly, rapidly. “Don’t make a sound, don’t utter a cry, but wait until I give the alarm. Then join me in the stern. First, assign two of your friends to cut the bow line. We’ll have to fight in order to cast off the line in the stern. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes!” muttered Leschamps fervently. “God bless you! I didn’t think you were real—I thought you might be some angel—you can trust me to be careful! I know the right ones to pick, and all we ask is to put a blade through one of these devils before we die!”

“Enough. Were any guards left aboard?”

“The lady’s cabin has a guard, yes. The Florentine, none.”

Devries had forgotten Messer Bardi. Now he laughed softly, grimly, and with a final warning, moved on aft.

From the rowers’ benches and this central planked walk, the cabins opened directly. The stern deck, above, was the danger point; guards were there, and on the rocks ashore, where the camp was. A low buzz of voices sounded. Somebody yawned.

“Ah! Look at the east—there’s the false dawn! Daylight will soon be here, and the morning prayer.”

Somebody laughed and made a jest, and Devries found himself at the entrance to the cabin passage. A figure moved in front of him.

“Stay out of here, comrade!” came the careless words. “You know the orders—”

The voice pointed the blow, the reaching hand. Devries had the guard by the throat, and plunged home his dagger. The blow missed. The guard wore a steel-mesh shirt. The gripping fingers sank in the sinewy throat, however, and the second blow drove home.

The guard sagged down. Working swiftly, Devries stripped off his chain shirt, took his sword-belt and helm, and went on. He knew now where he was; a moment, and he found the locked door of Countess Alix. He scratched on the wood and heard her voice.

“Who is it?”

“I.”

A low cry; hands fumbled at the bolts, the door swung open. He had reached her.

CHAPTER VIII

“No noise, no noise!”

Desperately, freeing himself from her ecstatic embrace, Devries took the girl in his arms for a brief moment. Then he pressed his burden upon her.

“Here, get into this mail-shirt, take this sword. We’ll have to fight for it—”

“Ah!” She recoiled from the touch. “Warm and sticky—it’s blood!”

“Not yours,” said he grimly. “Can you fight?”

“If I must, I suppose I can. Help me with it. It’s not sunrise yet—why have you come? How did you get here?”

Devries laughed at her eager flow of questions, as he aided her to get the chain-shirt on.

“All’s done,” he rejoined under his breath. “The pope’s riding hard for Rome. We might slip ashore, but we’d be run down in no time; Rais Hassan may be back at any moment now. I’ve loosed some of the slaves. Our one sure chance, win or lose all, is to cast loose the galley. To do that, we must put up a fight. If we can get her away from the shore, Rais Hassan and his men are lost, and we’re safe.”

“Oh!” A low, swift cry broke from her as she comprehended. Then she changed, quieted and came to him in the darkness, her hand on his arm. “Tell me. You saw the pope?”

“Yes, I suppose it was he,” said Devries.

“And you came back here. You might have gone with him—”

“Bah! I keep my promises; don’t mention it again. You’d have done the same.”

“Not I!” She laughed softly. “At least, not yesterday. Today, life’s different. But I warn you, don’t trust Messer Bardi! I heard him talking with Rais Hassan. They’re friends. Hassan meant to kill you and said so. Bardi only laughed.”

“Yes. I don’t like his laugh. Well, never mind him; he’s asleep.”

“Very well. Tell me what to do.”

“Use your sword on the line from the stern to the rocks. It’ll take some cutting. I’ll cover you while you do it.”

She assented; they gripped hands; then he drew open the door and stepped out.

“Wait. Don’t move till I return,” murmured Devries.

He headed aft. Catching a dim clank of chains, a vague stir on the benches, he muttered the name of Leschamps. The Frenchman came to him with a low, fierce word.

“Aye, lord! Twelve are freed. Two have gone for arms, two more to cut the bow line to shore, or cast it off. I’m freeing others.”

“We’ll need every man,” rejoined Devries. “I’ll wait, aft, until you’re ready, or until some alarm is caused.”

He rejoined the Countess Alix. The haze had vanished now; a vague gray was stealing over everything, token of the coming dawn. The two waited, weapons ready, in silence.

Came a sudden clank of chains, and a mutter of voices from the slave-benches. An officer on the stern deck gave a sharp order.

“Ali! See what those dogs are up to; fighting, perhaps. Tell Murad to lay the whip on them. The lazy Turk is probably snoring.”

Devries touched the girl. “Ready! The rope, mind, and nothing else.”

A step sounded on the ladder. A man leaped down to the deck; as he landed, the sword of Devries cut him down. His shrill death-cry gave alarm, and Devries was up the ladder with a leap. Yelping voices from the waist told that the slaves were ready.

Devries had one glimpse of the Countess Alix, making for the shore line; then he turned and faced the group of corsairs dimly visible. He stood grimly silent, while they cried out questions, demands, orders. As the girl's sword began to hack at the stout hawser, voices of alarm went up. An Arab leaped toward her across the deck, but Devries met him midway, and the keen Toledo swung and clashed. That man died.

"To me, Leschamps!" lifted the shout of Devries.

Half a dozen men here before him, around him; cries of alarm rising on shore, in the camp, a wild howl of naked men from the waist. Devries waited no longer, but hurled himself at the group of corsairs. In the obscurity they were uncertain, bewildered. He cut down one, and another. For a moment, he had visions of clearing the whole stern, single-handed, until a cry from the girl drew him around.

Two men had leaped aboard from shore—guards there—and were rushing at her. Barely in time, Devries came leaping in between. A sword-point found his body, but the chain-mail saved him from the thrust; as he staggered, the second man came diving in with a sweep of scimitar at the knees. Barely did Devries ward the blow. Then he had his balance again, and the Toledo blade swung and swung, cutting through steel cap and skull beneath like cardboard.

An instant of breathing-space. The galley was swinging out at the bow; slaves had oars against the rocks, pushing her out. There was a rush of men from the camp, a din of shrill yells. Half a dozen came tumbling aboard, just as the Countess Alix cried out.

"Finished! It's cut!"

Dawn was brightening. Another group came tumbling aboard, jumping the widening gap, throwing their comrades here into confusion. More took the leap, landing all asprawl on deck. A score of corsairs here now, and thrusting forward at Devries. One reached him, and yelled to Allah as the Toledo bit into him. Another flung himself bodily in and gripped Devries about the waist, dagger plunging vainly at the steel shirt. The sword-hilt smashed up into his face, smashed him backward, beat him away, and the point took him as he fell.

Sword in one hand, dagger in the other, Devries faced the rush; but here Leschamps intervened.

A wild and terrible howl, the ravening scream of wild beasts, pealed up as the freed slaves reached the stern-deck. Gaunt men, naked and bearded, armed with anything that had come to hand, they hurled themselves at the corsairs. Instantly there was a furious mêlée, pierced by the yells of fury and dismay from ashore, as the men in camp realized that the ship was swinging out. A few more came leaping over the rail. One missed, then another, and went down.

But here along the stern-deck swept death and passions let loose, as the slaves killed and were killed. Devries flung himself into the midst of the struggle, seeing that these naked men could scarce hope to face the armored Moslems. His voice rallied them, he surged into the forefront and led them, they gathered behind him and swept ahead in wild fury. They died fast, but they killed as they died, and the clanging, ringing Toledo crashed through helm and shield and armor.

Daggers bit, swords clashed, curved scimitars hacked and slashed. Devries was bleeding now, but the deck was clearing. Three or four corsairs remained in a knot, and he smashed straight at them. Steel whirled and clashed; the weight of his rush bore them back. A stiletto shivered against his steel shirt. Another stabbed into his neck. A scimitar cut across his chest vainly. The Toledo sang and crashed down again and again. But one man remained now, and him Leschamps took with a yell and a leap—took him down, rolled over and over with him, and rose with red dagger and exultant shout. Clear!

At a price, however. The growing daylight revealed terrible things as Devries, sobbing for breath, leaned on his sword and glanced around. Many of the unarmed slaves had died there. Leschamps and half a dozen more stood triumphant, and others were coming from the benches as they were freed; but the wounded corsairs fought to the very death.

Even as Devries looked around, he caught a yell, a cry, and saw the Countess Alix go down as a wounded Arab leaped on her with steel flashing. Leschamps yelled and went in with a leap, and pinned the Arab to the deck, but as the girl came to her feet, unhurt, she cried out again.

“Look! They’re coming aboard!”

So they were, indeed. They were coming over the rail as though by magic, half a dozen at once. Bows were twanging ashore; an arrow hit Devries between the shoulders, blunted on his chain shirt, but staggered him with the blow. And from ashore was going up a mighty shout, a wild pandemonium of voices—Rais Hassan was back with his full force, back in wrath and wild fury and insane rage!

They were coming aboard, yes. The slaves ran, hacking and thrusting, only to be cut down in their tracks. Half a dozen, a dozen—Arabs full armed from a small boat. And at the rail, helping them aboard, a man who had let down a rope to them—a man pallid and filled with terror, yet acting sharply enough in a pinch—Messer Bardi of Florence.



Bardi, a bloody stiletto in his hand, struck at her again, again.

To Devries, this moment was frightful. He seemed palsied, unable to move, as the corsairs came across the stern-deck with a rush, as the yelling slaves gathered to meet them, as the Countess Alix flew like a tigress at Bardi and cast off the ropes the Florentine had lowered. Then she slumped away, catching at the rail, and Bardi, a bloody stiletto in his hand, struck at her again, again—

With this, Devries found himself moving. What happened, he did not know; Bardi lay stretched on the deck, he was upholding Countess Alix, looking into her face, crying out her name.

“Not hurt, not hurt—much,” she gasped. “The chain-mail saved me—ah! Look, look!”

It was the supreme moment, the moment of crisis. The galley had swung well out from the rocks, no others could come aboard; but the dozen men in armor were making sad havoc of the thronging slaves. With a groan, Devries loosed the girl and rushed into the brunt of the fray, cursing the traitorous Florentine who had helped these fresh men aboard.

Armed now from the dead on the deck, the slaves fought with ferocity equal to that of the Moslems, but they were not skilled in fighting. Devries turned the tide, stemmed the corsair rush, and stood like a rock with the Toledo swinging red in the white day-stream. In vain they hammered and slashed at him.

Their leader sprang in, a renegade like Rais Hassan, with a dazzling display of skill as his curved blade swung and bit and slashed. He, too, was clad in chain mail; the Toledo struck it and glanced away. A slash in return sent Devries reeling, and the Moslem yells pealed up—but next instant they died. For, as the renegade leaped in to deliver the finishing blow, Devries reached him with a backhand slash across the face, sudden and unexpected; then the point drove home to the throat, and finished it.

The others drew away. They had no escape now, for the galley had drifted well off the rocks; they were between the devil and the deep sea with a vengeance, and what was left of the slave-pack went at them with a will, Leschamps leading. Devries, too, strode in upon them, saved Leschamps from a Moor at his back, and got his dagger-point into the Moor.

A yell close beside him, a cry of warning from Leschamps—too late! A stricken Turk, writhing half upright, stabbed and stabbed again. His point caught Devries in the thigh, beneath the edge of the mail-coat, and went deep. Not until the sword-point went through his beard did he relax in death, and Devries, leaning on the reddened point, knew that he was out of this fight and any other for many a day. He staggered to the rail and collapsed as Countess Alix came running to his aid.

For a space he sat leaning against the bulwark, weak and sick, then rallied. She had bound up the hurt thigh with deft, swift fingers, and the blood was checked. Devries nodded to her, smiled faintly, and looked across the deck.

“It’s over,” she was saying, jubilant and betwixt tears and laughter. “Over, my dear, ended!”

Ended, indeed. The last of the corsairs had leaped into the sea and was swimming for shore. The galley had drifted out so far that the arrows had ceased. The freed slaves, in a delirium of joy, were clearing the decks, flinging dead and dying over the side together, poniarding the wounded; no corsair was left alive on those red planks.

Leschamps, streaming blood from a dozen minor wounds, came up like a gaunt scarecrow, babbling almost incoherent French.

“A hundred and more of us, lord—we can work the ship, we can man the oars! She is yours. Give me your orders, and we obey.”

Devries pulled himself up a little until he could see the shore, and smiled grimly. The corsairs were grouped there in utmost dismay; Rais Hassan and his men, set ashore, were caught in their own trap now; instead of raiding Italy, they would be raided by Italy with bitter vengeance.

“Won!” said Devries, and met the rapt gaze of the Countess Alix. “Won—we’ve done the impossible! We’ve won—”

He leaned back again weakly. One of the slaves, who were given wine rations by the corsairs, came running with a cup. Devries drank, and felt the wine, bitter as it was, give him new life. He put up a hand to the Countess Alix.

“Help me get on my feet. I can stand well enough—”

As she aided him up, a long, shrill cry came from forward. It was echoed all down the deck. The naked, gaunt men paused in their work and stood staring. Daylight had merged into sunrise now; the whole eastern sky was red.

“What is it?” demanded Devries, leaning against the rail. “What is it, Leschamps?”

The scarecrow Frenchman had turned livid beneath his bronze. He lifted a shaking, blood-smearred hand. His eyes were wild, staring; a frightful cry broke from a group of the ex-slaves. They, too, were staring.

Devries turned painfully. He saw the Countess Alix, white as death, sway a little and then catch herself. He followed her gaze, the gaze of them all, out to the rocky promontory that cut off the shore to the south from view.

Something had appeared there, just beyond the promontory. A ship, tall and high, oars flashing and dripping; a ship, heading in for them—

“The galeasse!” gasped Leschamps. “We’re lost—lost—”

Lost, indeed. It was the Venetian galeasse of Curtogalli, and Devries felt his heart sink within him as she headed for them.

CHAPTER IX

The deck of the galley was wrapped in stricken silence.

The silence was broken by sobbing voices, gusty heart-broken wails, wild fierce prayers and blasphemies; then staring silence fell again.

Gone now was any gleam of hope. Useless now to fight, impossible to run, escape to shore was cut off by the corsairs stranded there. Men dropped weapons and sank down, covering their faces; others, with streaming tears, sobbed out their lost hopes. But Devries, one arm about the Countess Alix, leaned with the other on his sword and stood gazing at the great gay ship.

Suddenly her oars poised, remained motionless. She lost way. A few hundred yards distant, she halted and hung, as though indecisive.

"He's there—in the bow," said the Countess Alix with white lips.

Devries had already seen him. The tall, soldierly figure of Curtogalli himself, regarding them, regarding the groups of corsairs ashore, unheeding their hoarse yells. The situation must have been very clear to him, in this moment; Rais Hassan ashore, the galley taken by her own slaves, the figures of Devries and the girl there at the rail.

"He knows by this time," said Devries grimly, "that I saved him from Rais Hassan—and lost him his prize. Well, my dear, kiss me again! After all, a man can die but once—"

The Countess Alix turned to him, and kissed him. Then she faced again to the great galleasse and the tall, swarthy figure in the bow.

Suddenly Curtogalli moved. He took off his Persian helmet and dropped it beside him, as though he wished to be recognized beyond any doubt. He waved his hand, as though in salute; he turned, and disappeared among those around him. The oars of the galleasse dipped. She swung slowly. She headed away. Her sails caught the shore-breeze and filled, the oars were taken in—and she stood away steadily, rapidly, heading into the horizon.

Devries was the only one who understood, when he realized that she was actually leaving. He lifted his sword and waved it, and sank back against the bulwark.

"Good man, true knight!" he said, with a gasp of emotional reaction. The girl looked at him, amazement in her eyes.

"He's leaving? Oh, it can't be true—why would he do that?"

Devries smiled. How much Curtogalli knew, how much he forgot, how much he had forgiven—no matter now. His arm tightened about the Countess Alix, and he smiled again as he met her blue eyes.

"Why would he do that? To pay his debts; his debts to Rais Hassan, and to me, and to you, perhaps. He pays them like a true and gentle knight, God rest him! And now, my dear, kiss me again—this time in joy, in victory, in the flush of sunrise that'll gild all the future for us—"

And Curtogalli went his ways, to fame, to glory, to honors, with his debts paid.

[The end of *Lords of the Tideless Sea* by Henry Bedford-Jones]