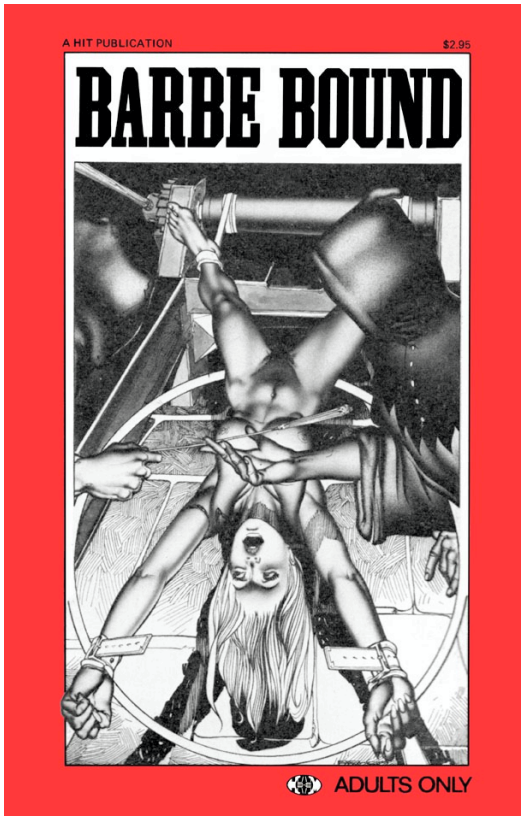


BARBE BOUND

by F.E. Campbell

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illustrated by The Bishop

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CHAPTER ONE

Barbe Bound

Malmain, Chatelaine of Bulaire, sighed wistfully as she watched the slight figure of the dark-haired girl busy upon its small errand. The child endeared, or was it kinder to see her as a woman? It was as a woman life would deal with her, had dealt with her now in this captivity. Barbe! How well the short sweet name suited this naiad of the forest who smiled so willingly in circumstances Malmain knew would have invoked only sullenness and dolor in herself.

Malmain was angry with the chain. It clattered musically yet disturbingly on the stone floor as the young feet tripped, with a surprising grace, upon such tasks as came their way. Barbe, with her dark, wise eyes, had accepted the fetters riveted on her ankles with a far better grace than did the Dame of Bulaire. There had been a heated exchange between the good woman and her lord. The Earl Jehan of Bulaire had little patience for feminine sympathies. To him it was obvious logic that a captive, even though she was but a girl, be properly shackled. To leave a prisoner untrammelled or but lightly confined was to invite loss. "The wench would laugh at us," he avowed gruffly.

"She is of noble blood and little more than a stripling girl," Malmain had countered. "She can spend her days with me. I will watch her. What chance has she of escape from Bulaire! She is of sweet temper."

"Sweet or not she is a little fox in a trap. Let us keep her so."

"But chained! Wrist and ankle?"

"And why not! She would wear no fewer ornaments elsewhere. If M'Lord Galleas pays my price she'll have bonds 'aplenty."

"I am fond of the child. She accepts that you have captured her and intend her better. She has understanding beyond her years."

"Aye, and nimble feet perchance. Would thou feel happier with her safe in a dungeon, properly ironed?"

"Nay! To have the winsome lass pining in that cold gloom would give me grief and you no profit. Galleas will part with no gold for a skeleton. Barbe is not for chaining in dank holes below the light. I wish she was our daughter. I grieve for her."

"Then let us iron her sensibly and she can attend thee through the day. But at night she'll be secure. Depend on it."

Malmain had settled for what she knew was a small victory. By the judgement of the times it would be an absurd tolerance and a dangerous risk to allow a captive, even such as Barbe, the run of the castle - even fully chained. That she be relieved all fetters save those upon her feet would seem to many an act of lunacy inviting disaster. Yet so it was! Jehan was fond of his determined spouse, and though he would never admit it, his heart had been touched by this dark-haired beauty whom fate had placed in his possession. The girl bore him small malice; her eyes were

limpid when they sought his. She understood the forces resolving her fate. Thus it was that Barbe of Camelford walked with shackled feet but with wrists and neck inviolate. She knew herself privileged and was grateful.

"Thou art skilled with a needle, child."

Barbe smiled pensively. "I had no mother. It was meet I learn wifely crafts to return my father's love."

"His heart must be sorely heavy at thy loss, and thine too. M'Lord supposes thy thoughts laden with plans or hopes of escape?"

The slight shoulders shrugged: the dark eyes smiled sadly. "Camelford has no power against Bulaire. He will not waste men's lives in useless bloodshed, nor do I wish him to."

"But he must do something, child! He is a father."

"He will seek audience with the King. But he is without influence."

"But you, child, are very sweet yet ye have mettle. There is purpose in you. Are ye not tempted to some desperate act?"

With elfin smile in mischief Barbe kicked one foot so that its links responded. She held it out to view and exclaimed ruefully: "With these things fast upon me! When the smith pounded his rivets flat I gave up hope."

"Thy chains do not dismay thee?"

"You have been kind to me, Madam. I will not repay thee with a sour visage. I will be happy as may be as captive of Bulaire."

Malmain sighed. The girl was exquisite. Everything a daughter should be. Her maternal eye focused on the metal band about the slender ankle. "Renan, our smith, was careless. One anklet is loose enough to chafe. Thy skin betrays its hurt, child."

"It is not more than I can bear, Madam."

"Not yet perhaps, but it will worsen. Come."

How slowly a shackled girl must walk if she is to do so with grace and without falling! Malmain adjusted her steps as they traversed the steps and halls. Her concerned eye detected the wince when a prisoned foot was harshly snubbed. It would be wise to make the iron bands snug. The maid might wear them long enough. Her price might inhibit her sale. Even if sold, she would go to her new owner well secured.

The Castle smithy was a daunting place for a captive girl. It was harshly male, and Renan's eye was carnal, as was that of his helper. Barbe shivered inwardly beneath their stares and was thankful for the presence of Bulaire's Mistress. These men made her naked with their eyes. She knew it would pleasure them to load her with all the bonds of thraldom her flesh could bear.

She suspected Renan resented the implied criticism of his skill. When he had struck the offending iron from the chafed limb he insisted on binding the freed member with cord to a stanchion to ensure her helplessness while he wrought her shackle into a more sympathetic gyve. But Malmain would have none of his officious concern.

"Send the man to the kitchen, Renan for hot water and a towel. If binding female flesh pleases thee then bind her other foot."

Renan did it with a pretence of goodwill, but his cords bit deep. His victim kept her silence with the pain. She could bear it for the time she must. But she was close to tears of gratitude while Malmain bathed and laved the ankle that would soon, once more, know the bite of metal. When the newly fashioned anklet was fitted and found good, she watched in awed fascination as the two rivets were inserted and pounded into implacability with ringing blows of a hammer that must miss her flesh by no more than an inch. It was a daunting thing to behold this welding of the iron upon her flesh. If anything was to emphasize her loss of liberty it would be this. With ankles so uncompromisingly joined she could forget freedom.

"She will stay safe in Bulaire, M'Lady."

"And had thee thy way, she'd sport thy wares on wrist and neck as well, I have no doubt," Malmain said tartly.

"At least on her filthy neck, M'lady. T'would keep her well in tow."

"Come child." Malmain relished the smithy no more than did her charge. "Is the iron kinder now?"

"Yes, oh yes!" Barbe took her careful measured steps beside her benefactress. She was thankful to be with a woman and away from male lechery. "I am so grateful to you. I know I owe you much." Her voice faltered. "Why was the smith so anxious for a band upon my neck? What use has it?"

Malmain gave an angry "Umph! An ye wear one, child, ye'll know. 'Tis a bane for slaves lest they forget. It is forever there to be felt and fingered and hated. It is to be stared at, telling all who see that the girl who wears it is thrall. It bears a ring to which a chain may be locked. It is less a bond and more a punishment. I want it not upon thy fair throat."

It was good to be back in the Chatelaine's own quarters. In the smithy and about the courtyard it was too easy for a girl to see fearful things to wilt her outrage. Barbe busied herself with her domestic task and pondered. There was much to ponder on.

"Madam, may I ask questions of . . . of what may befall?"

"If I know the answers I will tell thee, love."

"If I am bartered and taken hence, will it be to a dungeon?"

"Most probably. I would fain tell thee otherwise."

A faint flush spread on the cheeks intent above the thread. "I have been told that a girl so imprisoned is first stripped?"

The Lady Malmain pursed her lips. "In such things there are no good tidings. What you have heard is true. Men excuse their shamefulness by saying she will be easier to control, more docile naked than if clothed. They say she is thus easier to bind or to punish. In that they are right, but it is still shameful!"

"Will I be bound or chained?"

"Child, ye speak as though these things must happen. Perchance none may befall."

"I am up for barter, Madam. I can scarce hope for kindness such as yours. The man who pays so much gold will wish me safe according to the customs of such things."

Malmain sighed. "Ye will be bound or chained, child. 'Tis common usage. What use to tell thee different."

The dark eyed girl's needle flashed determinedly as though its purpose gave her strength to learn her fate. "And that girls so used are often whipped for the sport of men or to make her speak of privy things she would not disclose?"

"Barbe, dear girl, such thoughts are terrible. Why pursue them!"

"That I be armed by knowledge, madam. I fear the worst, for I know why I am a prisoner and why certain men will pay ransom for me." Again the pink tide rising. "They do not desire me as men desire a woman. I am a useful chattel, a unit for bargain or bribe. There will be no love or sympathy in my imprisonments. They may resent my cost and be vindictive."

Malmain shook her head sadly. "You reason well, child I cannot say that none what ye fear may happen. Alas, girls in dungeons are likely to know the whip too well. It is a male pleasure they can not gainsay."

Tenderly, the young hand reached to touch that of her companion. "My thanks, Madam. Fear not that I will lose my smile or my joy in thee or in this place we share. I am forewarned. T'will lessen my shock should ill befall. In the dark of night I have thought of these things and wondered and been fearful."

It was Malmain's turn to flush. "Were I not a wife with a duty to her lord I would keep ye with me through the night time. It grieves me that your wrist be chained each night to your bed in that small chamber."

Barbe smiled. "It is no painful, madam. I do not mind. But it is lonely."

She was a realist. The nature of the times left maidens in little doubt of their place and value. The land was divided and torn. William the Norman's conquest of the Island was well past, but the Saxons smoldered in revolt, a sullen threat to their overlords. The fierce pride of the conquerors led them to battle among themselves for the division of the spoils and the favor of their King. And a dark-haired maid of Norman blood might be above the aspirations of a Saxon male, but she was as much of a pawn in the play for power as any thrall. Through a mockery of marriage and an immediate pregnancy she could be made to weld two noble names and make them strong. That it be done by force or capture and ransom was a fact with precedents enough. Jehan of Bulaire had shown her no brutality, but he would hold her securely and barter her shrewdly. For the moment he enjoyed the disposition of her being. That night, as they shared meat at the late meal, she listened with respect and alert interest.

"I have word that M'Lord Galleas will pay," he informed his spouse gruffly between mouthfuls. "It came not from him, he thinks to make me sweat awhile."

"Of what use is she to him? Galleas has more than enough wife in that shrew who rules his house. T'would sit ill with all that he take a Norman girl as leman."

"Nay, Galleas has enough wenches for his sport, and at lesser cost. He'll use her to get himself closer to the King."

"In the bargaining, cans't not draw a pledge that he use her kindly. So lovesome a child should not be for his dungeon and his chains."

Lord Jehan chuckled at Malmain's concern. He winked lewdly at the captive. "Ye 'ave a Champion, girl. Methinks M'Lady loves thee more than she does me. A few days in a dungeon never hurt a lass."

"A few days!" Malmain's voice was caustic. "More like to be a few months, and the Dame of Galleas visiting her daily with a whip. There's tales enough."

"Come, woman, you frighten the girl." He grinned with faint affection at Barbe's troubled face. "A wench of thy quality will not go begging. The young Sieur de Chantylon is the favourite of the King. He needs a Norman wife. Galleas will turn a neat quick profit. You'll not rot in his chains."

"Cannot Chantylon deal with thee? What place has Galleas in all these dealings?"

"Galleas can do me favours as well as give me gold. If guilt is to be levied in this bartering of Norman flesh let it be on his head. Chantylon is beyond the ken of Bulaire. He needs me not."

"M'Lord." Barbe ventured boldly. "Why not my father–?"

Jehan eyed her with compassion. "The fiefdom of Camelford has neither gold nor influence, child. I doubt the King remembers him."

"He would give everything."

"Why impoverish him? Should thee end up the bride, or even the leman of Chantylon, thy father's stature could scarce fail to grow."

It was hopeless. Barbe had known herself lost from that moment when the captain of the troop which had intercepted her had bound her hands behind her back and lifted her astride his horse. The cutting cruelty of his cords had been more eloquent than words or threats. From that time on her life had changed.

Sitting upon the cot in the small prison room in which she spent nights at Bulaire, Barbe fingered the heavy metal band that the Lord Jehan himself locked on the slenderness of her right wrist each night. From it a length of equally heavy chain led to the massive ring in the stone beside her bed. It had been wrought for her as had the shackles on her feet, but it was massive enough to have held a dozen men, let alone a slip of a girl. It was very snug. There would be no slipping out of it. Night after night she had tried, only to chafe her wrist and draw a reprimand. Her chain gave her the tiny freedom of the room, even allowing her to peer through the bars of the window, but would not allow her to touch the door. Ruefully she knew that, even if she was not so fastened, the chains upon her feet would prevent escape. If some miracle enabled her to reach the forest, her hobbled stumbling steps would be easily followed and overtaken. When the smith had been done with her that first day she had woefully said farewell to freedom. For a girl riveted in chains there was no escape.

But Barbe was young. For the young, hope does not entirely die. Jehan's words at supper had been only half a threat. Her pulse had quickened when the name of Chantylon had entered the talk. Mark of Chantylon was a name known to all, a legend never seen but one to fill the heart of a maid with rosy dreams It would have been better to have been wooed and won rather than to have been bought and sold. But if the dungeons and the chains of Galleas were her only path to nobility and perhaps love she would bear them with some fortitude. The young Sieur de Chantylon, favourite of the King, was unlikely to come to Camelford. But a slavegirl, bought and sold, might travel anywhere on the end of her lord's tether. She well knew how journeys to the King and the wonders of his Court traversed strange paths.

For lack of aught else to do she reclined upon the cot so that her free hand could reach the chain whose links joined her ankles. Idly she played with it in a poignant realization that when it was stricken from her she would part from it with sadness, for with it would go the care and affection of Dame Malmain and all the privileges the good woman had been able to contrive. Captives of any kind were rarely

vouchsafed the daily freedom that she enjoyed. Even in her father's keep at Camelford a prisoner would be more harshly confined. Should Galleas hold her hostage, his chains would be heavy and his dungeon deep. Barbe sighed and blinked back a tear. If her more distant future held a ray of light, such comfort was sadly lacking in her immediate prospects. Lying down she cried herself to sleep.

She awoke to sunlight and sound. The sound was not such as to cause her to spring awake. It was the normal small echoes of a new day in the courtyard of Bulaire, the chatter of a scullery wench with the lackeys who would be teasing her, and the heavier military noises of men-at-arms. But woven into the mundane was a thread of melody.

It was haunting.

Barbe sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Soon, Malmain would come and unlock the shackle on her wrist so that her day might begin. For the nonce she kicked at the links, warm from sharing her bed, so that their music heralded another day of captivity. She did the same for the metal tether on her wrist. It was as though she needed the assurance of the clinking response to tell her she could not rise and return to Camelford and her father's keep. It set the tone for a captive's day.

She identified the music as a lute. It was being played with skill, and the male voice that accompanied it was pleasing to the ear. Her window was high, but the sounds rose to it on the quiet morning air as though with a personal intent. Idly she rose and made her way to the bars, her ears alert. Minstrels were common enough and their stock-in-trade hackneyed, yet this one had a quality . . .

"The love I seek is passing fair.
Her eyes are dark as her raven hair . . ."

The eternal lament for lost love touched the captive maid. The notes of the lute melodically robbed the words of anything but romantic rhyme, but Barbe smiled wistfully. She was one of the dark ones with hair like a raven's wing. A lifetime past Minstrels would have extolled the flaxen gold of Saxon pulchritude. But itinerant musicians had a canny eye for coin and favour and adjusted their dream maidens accordingly.

"I loved her long, I'll ne'er forget. My whole life long I seek her yet . . ."

Barbe gripped the bars and peered down at the small group lured from their tasks by the appealing jingle. The distance was such that both sight and sound were muted, but he who played and sang was a well favoured youth with shoulders broad and an assured poise. His mastery of his instrument and his voice conveyed belief he sang for joy and not for whatever coppers might come his way because of it.

"An' she can hear and she repine.
Then let her give her love a sign . . ."

It was of course not possible! The words were not for her. Were she not a dark eyed maid chained in Jehan's tower room she would give them but a passing smile. But captives cling to threads of wishful thinking. Barbe longed to believe the banalities of the Minstrel's song were for her ears only and that he who sang would hope for something from her in return. Feeling childish, but with quickened pulse, she found her scarf. Rolling it into a ball, she awkwardly used her one free arm to hurl it as far as she could through the restricting bars and out into the sunlight. Anxiously she watched it flutter down. A lackey nudged as though in tribute to some unknown recognition, his fingers did not pause upon the strings. The fabric came to rest upon the ground. The incident was past. The prisoner wondered if it was but fancy that the lute and the voice pealed out a higher note. Wistfully she gazed out beyond the bars to a freedom her chains denied.

Sitting, waiting on her cot, and toying with her chain as free maids toy with bangles, the captive girl wondered which of such mornings would be her last in this small room. It was a strange feeling to know herself merchandise, her person disposed of at the will of others, herself confined or bound so that she could gainsay nothing. But she was determined to show as smiling a countenance as she could contrive. She suspected sullenness and frowns would earn her only uncomfortable impositions. She knew a sudden alarm at thought of her scarf and the Lord Jehan. If a serving wench picked it up and gave it to him with the story! Almost certainly he would react with more chains or less savory quarters by which to inhibit her enterprise. He might even punitively punish! In sudden alarm she went to the window. But the small cheerful group had dispersed, the minstrel was nowhere to be seen, the spot upon the ground where her scarf' had rested was bare.

CHAPTER TWO

"Ye'll bid the lass your farewells here, woman." The Lord Jehan's voice was as gruff as ever, but tinged with jubilation. "I want no tears in the courtyard."

Dame Malmain's grief was vicious, but she knew the limits of her authority and bowed to them. "But to send only soldiers and the gold! 'Tis a mark of small respect."

"The gold is regard enough," her spouse said with satisfaction. "The company of Galleas is not such that I mourn his absence. His men are civil and competent."

"But she is so young! I fear for her alone with men. The forest of Avangel is a place for rape and murder and worse."

"You're dreaming, woman. Witches tales! The lass's maidenhead is safe enough. Her escort knows her value and won't risk their skins for a bit o' maiden flesh."

"But, do they take her thus, chained, to be tossed over a horse's back?"

"Malmain, stop it! You alarm the girl needlessly and offer her no service by these imaginings. She'll sit her horse properly. I'll take her to Renan myself for the striking off o' her fetters."

Barbe knew it was a chapter's end. Her enslavement would be marked by such, each different, leading her to an end she knew not. She gazed on Malmain's stricken face with an anguish for this woman who had been kind, rather than for herself. They embraced and joined their salty drops of grief. With Jehan's hand upon her arm she hobbled from the familiar chamber and dared not look back.

"Damn, I've no the time for this!" Chuckling at his captive's startled look he gathered Barbe in his arms and carried her. With chained feet dangling and a shy arm around her owner's neck the dark eyed girl wondered if he would feel the beating of her heart.

"I'd have liked to iron thee proper, lass," Renan the smith said jocularly as the trembling maid was set beside his anvil. " 'Tis with sorrow I loose thy limbs."

Barbe knew herself flushing beneath the regard of an exclusively male audience for what she saw only as her shame. Fetters, whether they were being hammered on or stricken off, were not a thing of pride. They violated a feminine mystique. Their eyes saw her naked. She sat on the box, her foot in its shackle laid across the anvil. The hammer wrought its clanging magic. When she stood again with Jehan's hand solicitously beneath her arm she was free. She longed passionately to run, to leap, to disport herself in tomboy ways, but instead stood passive for her delivery.

"Ye'll be in good hands, girl. The captain here knows his trade. There'll be none molest thee on thy journey." Jehan's voice was husky.

Three tall men, chain mail and swords, their eyes sober and impersonal, Barbe felt their power as a thing tangible in the air. The Captain's bow was more gracious than expected, his voice respectful but authoritative. "This is an honour, M'Lady. M'Lord Galleas esteems thy' person. It will be delivered intact."

Jehan had stepped back and now viewed the tableau with amused detachment. "Art' thou going to trust the child?" he asked without concern.

The same thought had been uppermost in Barbe's mind. She rejected a fleeting notion of offering her parole. They would do as they wished with her anyway, and why bind herself with honour as well as whatever bond they chose to use!

"Forgive me, M'Lady, but 'tis proper I bind thee." Barbe shrugged. She had seen the cords passed to the Captain's hand. Obediently she allowed herself to be turned about and her arms drawn back. She stood erect, head high, while her hands were positioned palm to palm and her wrists bound tight. She knew after awhile the strictures would hurt and that she could never free herself of them.

"Ye tie a firm knot, Captain," Jehan approved.

A quick breath flared from the captive girl's nostrils as another band was passed round her elbows and drawn tight. She bit back the protest the pain had sparked. Best she be compliant, the pert damoiselle willing to bear her bonds in gratitude for male attention. Perhaps the male might be lulled into carelessness.

"Nothing like getting a wench's elbows tight to keep her attention." Jehan was obviously enjoying himself.

Barbe tried not to wince as several bands were looped round her bare arms and pulled until her elbows were squashed together. When the final knot was tugged she was close to tears. It was a cruel way to bind a girl. The pain would become increasingly brutal, it thrust her breasts into a shameful prominence, it robbed her of any vestige of hope of escape. The Lord Jehan was right, she would give her captor her full subservience while so tied. It would tax her fortitude not to also give them tears and pleas.

She was a doll in the Captain's arms as she was placed astride a horse. Its rein trailed to the saddle of one of the men; she would not control it. "Ye may live to thank me, girl." was Jehan's rough farewell.

They rode through the big gate towards the forest.

The change came with the trees. Impassivity was replaced by animation. The cavalcade walk quickened to a trot that became brisk and sustained. The bound girl suspected the trot would have become a gallop had it not been for the distance they must travel, the horses stamina would need be husbanded. She was thankful for skill as a rider. She had ridden such that her movements in the saddle were easy and relaxed. Her steed's gait was even. Thus the agony of her bound arms was lessened. To have bounced against the action of the horse could have doubled the distress. It was bad enough. The cords were biting deep. She intercepted enquiring glances as though her escort awaited her complaints. She did her best to keep her head erect, her face serene. The daughter of Camelford would plead only when she must.

"Ye ride well, M'Lady."

"Aye. My father taught me. I rode often when I was free."

"Your captivity may be short, M'Lady."

Barbe was surprised. She searched the stern face. "Oh? M'Lady thought that not likely?"

"I am but a soldier, maam. But I hear bits and pieces. From them I deem your prisonment short."

"If I am near to freedom, must I be bound so cruelly?"

"It is best, M'Lady."

"You think I would go galloping off into the trees! Come, Captain! I am only a girl, but I am not a fool."

"I could not blame thee. Escape is sweet for anyone."

"Take me to Camelford and my father's house. He will reward thee and give thee service. It is wrong that I be used like this."

He allowed himself a smile. "A pretty thought. It could earn destruction for Camelford and all of us. Nay, M'Lady, rest in thy bonds in peace. 'Tis far the best."

Barbe subsided into pain. She had tried as a captive must always try. Se had expected nothing so knew no loss. On sudden impulse she asked: "What is thy name, Captain?"

"I am called Brunet, maam."

In a capricious feminine instinct Barbe committed the outrageous: "Captain Brunet, take me to my father, accept his service. Then marry me."

There was no slackening of the forward pace. The men, if they had heard her words, turned not to look. Brunet's face as he regarded her was unleavened by a smile but his eyes smoldered. Barbe knew herself stripped and assessed.

"You do me honour, M'Lady."

"Well?"

"You must indeed fear that to which we escort thee?"

"And why not! If these cords within my skin be an earnest of his esteems, I have need to fear."

A faint smile at last softened his lips and eyes. "I am uncertain of thee, maam. Thou art' either foolish or brave. I suspect thee. Dost thee fail to realize thy father's wrath?"

"You misjudge us, Captain. And thyself . . . Thou art not ill-favored. Any maid such as I am, or any father facing my father's loss, would most happily choose thee against what is rumoured of Galleas."

His smile acknowledged her earnestness. "I wish it was otherwise, M'Lady. Your offer would tempt any man. I give thee thanks."

"Yet you refuse?"

"I have no choice. I ask thee be silent on the issue."

"Or I be gagged?" Her voice knew its first bitterness.

"No, M'Lady. Only that you speak not of what ye may regret."

Again Barbe sought her pain. It was an ever present companion in distress, diverting her thoughts from the unattainable. Perhaps that was one of the functions of the elbow cords, to give her other concerns than importunities. She allowed herself to drift into an unrewarded silence.

She picked up the threads of comment and remark much as one becomes aware of distant but approaching sounds. Her inattention was pierced by a soldier's comment.

"We'll not touch Tressling by night."

The Captain's voice was unconcerned. "We'll spend the night in the Forest. The less Tressling sees the better."

"You mean the girl?"

"Aye. 'Tis M'Lord Gorlois's concern, none other's." Barbe tensed. Her mind raced. Tressling was not on the road to the Castle of Galleas. She knew enough of distances and directions to discern discrepancy. And Gorlois! Milord Gorlois was a name to reckon with. A robber Baron, or high lord of Anglia according to the view. His domain, too, was far distant from the lands of Galleas.

"Will th' lass be bedded before or after the Bishop gives his blessing, think ye?"

"Does it matter!" Brunet's voice was terse.

"There'll be no Bishop. Milord Gorlois has no need of such. He'll use her like the others. Then there'll be a tower room for her."

"Old wives cackle!" Brunet exclaimed testily. "I want no more of it in the lass's hearing."

"Indeed, Captain, I would fain hear more!" Barbe protested. "Are there things a captive girl should know?"

"A captive girl need not concern herself." Brunet said dryly. "One lord is like enough to another; she will not know the difference."

"Am I not the captive of Galleas?"

Brunet's "Humph!" was sardonic. His men openly chuckled. "Nay. We ambushed his men, took the gold and purchased thee with it for M'Lord Gorlois. Methinks Galleas will be an angry and a poorer man."

Barbe's heart was thudding painfully. But how right Brunet was! To a maiden bound as she was bound what difference was there! To either, she would be but an instrument of lust or greed. Angrily and hopelessly she strained her wracked shoulders against her bonds. The ropes, now deep in her flesh, bit back savagely with a personal venom.

"Since ye deal in thefts and ransom, why not keep me for thyself?" she asked resentfully.

"We take you for our Liege an' we gain honour. We take you for ourselves we earn the gibbet." The soldier's voice was as sour as her own.

It was true enough. In their way these men were no more free than she herself. She turned appealing eyes upon Brunet. "What will Gorlois do with me, Captain?"

"I do not know."

"Want me to tell her, Captain?"

"Silence dolt! For all we know she may find kindness. 'Tis best we now remember the man of Galleas's who escaped us. We've no time for chatter. I want the glade in the stream this night. Tomorrow we'll be home."

"An' we share the maid come dark?" The query was ribald.

"If ye seek death." said Brunet darkly. They rode on in silent haste.

The Glade was a pleasant place, but to the bound girl it was one more prison. The Captain's strength lifted her to the grass while his men dealt with the horses and with food. Barbe stood disconsolate. Her night in this place and bound as she was bound might be less happy than her day.

For the first time, Brunet showed a wavering of poise.

He was obviously thinking, eyeing his captive doubtfully. But his doubt, if any, was short lived. Going to a saddle he returned with a coiled length of slender hide. Neither teeth nor strength could prevail against its tensile toughness. Only a knife would saw it asunder.

For the second time that day he said gently, "Forgive me, M'Lady," and made a noose fast about Barbe's neck. Meeting her reproachful eyes he defended the new indignity. "Ye must have some freedoms, M'Lady."

When she realized his intent a blush mantled her. How absurd men were! Bound as she was bound how could she! Denunciation was temptingly on her tongue when he turned her about and began to tug at knots. Eagerly, she stood for his attention. To be rid of the bands around her elbows was a joy transcending all else. Gladly would she wear a collar like a dog if that was all the price of her arms. Gaspingly, she controlled her moans as the strands were peeled from her skin, first her elbows, then her wrists. In glowing thankfulness Barbe stood rubbing and marvelling at her weals. They were scarlet and angry and deep so that her massaging fingers found ridged flesh on which to work the magic of their touch. She looked up at the serious intent regard of the man who had bound and now freed her.

"Thank you, Brunet. I am grateful."

He inclined his head, pleased. He added to and tightened the knots at her throat, then did the same for the other end around a slender trunk. He motioned to a clump of bushes. "You will have privacy."

His captive said another "thank you" and took her blush with her where she went.

It was a strange new feeling: free yet bound! All her limbs were hers to use in a manner she had not known since the men of Bulaire had bound her that evil day of her first capture. In the shelter of the bushes and out of sight of the men, Barbe fingered the leather band about her neck. Testing its knots she found them unsympathetic to her finger's strength. Given time and patience she might at last prevail on them. But she had neither! Should she delay her privacy too long she might be dragged out by her neck and given no other respite. The lovely dream of untying herself and stealing silently away into the trees died. She had best be a tractable prisoner and earn no male cruelty. Smiling, she returned to where a small fire now crackled on the sward.

"Thy tether will reach the stream."

It was neither a suggestion nor command, but she went gladly. The tough leather trailing from her neck was like a watchdog, waiting to attack should she go a step too far. She drank deep and washed, drying herself with the fabric of her skirt. She used the freedom of her hands to tidy and arrange her hair. She smiled at Brunet as she joined the circle and was given meat.

"You are a beautiful woman, M'Lady."

It could be a tribute or a prelude to demand. She took it as the former and said her pretty, "Thank you, Captain."

"And sensible to boot."

She supposed he meant her ready acceptance of the bushes and the stream. She flushed again but nodded thankfully.

"I speak of your behaviour through the day." he told her gravely. "No hysterics, no threats, no demands."

"Would they have done me aught of good?"

"Nay, but 'tis natural." He gave her a quizzical glance, amused. "Or do thee hope to disarm so that we become careless?"

She fingered the weals on her arms and looked at him reproachfully. "Careless!"

He shrugged. "Thou art' a lady. Being bound must be a sore trial."

"An' if I were not a lady?"

" 'Tis common for a serving girl or such to be bound." She knew this true. It was a common punishment for delinquent maids. And maids were forever delinquent. Even in her father's house it happened. She remembered one such tearful trollop who had pleaded with her to intervene on her behalf so that she might be freed of ropes but whipped instead. The short sharp pain of the whip was easier for her to bear than the endless nag of a day in bondage. Barbe wondered if she herself might come to judge it so.

"I have much to learn in such things," she admitted ruefully. "But no doubt I will be taught."

He laughed shortly. "Ye learn quickly and well."

"This master you serve so well, the Lord Gorlois, will he keep me bound?"

She could tell it was something of which he did not wish to speak. One of the soldiers seemed about to contribute information, but was silenced by a glance.

They had a rug, and laid it on the grass for her. When it came time to sleep, Barbe eyed the cord in her captor's hand sadly. "Must you bind me again?" she asked without hope.

"You have the freedom of the leash, M'Lady. But I dare not trust your hands."

"I suppose so," she agreed regretfully. "Don't think I'm not grateful."

"You may cross your wrists at your back, maam. Your elbows will remain free.

You cannot sleep with them tied."

Once more she knew a captive's gratitude for a small mercy. Almost gladly she presented him with her back and her crossed wrists. She stood firm while she was bound.

"Thank you, Captain."

He looked down at her with wry amusement. "So 'twas that bad, eh?"

"To tie a girl's elbows as you had mine is torture."

" 'Ti a common way to keep a wench obedient." he said defensively,

"Have I not been obedient?"

"Aye, that ye have, M'Lady. And ye'll sleep easier because of it."

Barbe was content. She was helpless, but such pain as her wrists were feeling now was slight compared with her bondage of the day. She reclined as gracefully as she could and said a chaste 'good-night'.

They were up with the sun. Barbe sensed the men's anxiety to deliver her and find the security of their home ground. It was an urgency she did not share, but she understood it. The Forest of Avangel had dark depths where dark deeds had taken place and would again. It was a place for trolls and witches, warlocks and things of the night.

There came the inevitable moment. She had worn the leash upon her neck with gratitude. When the time came to exchange it for something else, her eyes betrayed her distrust of the cord. But without a word said she turned helpfully and crossed her wrists.

"I am sorry, M'Lady." Brunet uncrossed them and placed them palm to palm.

Her faint hopes plummeted. "Please, Brunet, not my elbows again?"

"It is the custom, ma'am. I have no excuse."

"Tie my arms to my sides."

"It is an easy binding to elude, M'Lady."

"Tie my thumbs with string as well as bind my wrists?"

" 'Tis an ingenious thought, and effective I've no doubt. But I have a duty."

"But there must be some way of tying me so I can't get loose besides that!"

"Yes, maam. But you have been told the reasons. Please do not make this harder for us both than need be."

CHAPTER THREE

The men of Gorlois fought with fury. But Galleas' troop outnumbered them four to one. A mailed man had caught Barbe's horse as it had reared in alarm at the sudden commotion. He tied its rein to a sapling before rejoining the fray. The captive girl had, perforce, to sit impotently and watch the defeat of her escort. The soldier had

prudently tied her ankle to the saddle girth so she could not dismount. Her fascinated eyes beheld Brunet strike and strike again, but in the melee she lost sight of him. When it was over he was gone. One of his men had also disappeared, the other lay dead.

The Forest of Avangel had seen much of battle. It closed its dark silence upon the scene and claimed it for its own. Barbe's new captors now reversed their role and departed with her in the same urgency that had motivated Brunet. The thong had been taken from her ankle and her horse's reign was now in a stranger's hand. Wryly the captive girl recognized her lot had scarcely changed.

"I am honoured, M'Lady, and pleased to find thee safe. Thou has't not been harmed?"

He rode beside her. A bluff hearty man with a mop of red hair and a lewd eye that stripped her naked and evaluated her charms. Her breasts, in motion to the horse's gait, pleased him.

"I have not been raped, Captain."

Barbe understood the flicker of disappointment in his regard A girl has but a single maidenhead to attest her purity. Had she lost it she would be fair game.

"M'Lord Galleas bids thee welcome, girl. My name is Brastias."

"Captain?"

"Aye. I'll attend thee safe to Gurnie."

"Dos't know what awaits me there?"

His laugh was boisterous. "Let the mind wander, girl. You'll conjure visions enough."

He was not of Brunet's quality, but she had best explore. "Captain. Please loosen my elbows. Their bindings serve no purpose save to hurt."

Surprisingly, he rode close and examined her wealed flesh. Allowing his troop to jog along their way, he reined in and took the time to sever Brunet's knot and peel the thong from the scarlet skin. Even in the pain of it, Barbe looked at him with gratitude. When he deftly did the thing she had thought of the day before and tied her thumbs together with a single shrewd strand cunningly cinched, she knew herself infinitely better off. He had been careful but kind.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Thou art most welcome, girl." His eyes glinted a coarse humour. Methinks thee'll not get loose."

They cantered after the cavalcade. Barbe noted his careful pouching of the cord which had cut her skin. But for the nonce she was enjoying the euphoria of a captive suddenly freed. Her joined thumbs mattered little. She would always be kept helpless from escape by one means or another. Her bound wrists would have sufficed. But if it pleased him also to secure her thumbs she would not complain.

"Is our journey long?"

"Long enough. We'll get well out of the Gorlois realm tonight before we camp. Tomorrow I'll deliver thee safe and sound."

"A single night to camp?"

"With luck." He shrewdly sensed her concern. "In what ways did they bind thee through the dark, girl?"

She told him, unable to meet his eyes.

"A dull night, lass." Seeing her instant apprehension, he guffawed. "We'll do better by thee or thee by us! But fear not for they cunt. It belongs to M'Lord Galleas. He paid much gold for it."

"Is that all he wants of me?"

"Nay. But 'tis a lovesome thing to have around." He chuckled. "I'd value it myself were it not worth more wealth than I'll ever see."

"Have no females no other worth to men?"

"Oh aye! An' ye were common stuff there's work. But you're nobility. A noble wench has but blue blood and a hole between her legs."

His values and his vulgarity were new to Barbe. She found herself examining them more closely than she would have done a month past. It was a frightening thought that a scullery maid had more to offer than herself. Yet it was so! Should she find a safe haven somewhere in these captivities it would be as a brood mare to perpetuate a line. If not that, then a whore. How fine the line that divided the two conditions! She rode on in moody silence. Speech was unrewarding.

They camped late, seemingly beyond the influence of Gorlois wrath. The troop was larger than her former escort. It had come well supplied. With a fire going there emerged jollity. In an absent manner Brastias tied one of her arms to a sapling so that she must await the more important tending of the horses and the fire. Sentries were posted. Supplies were spread upon the grass, among them a keg of ale. Barbe eyed it without favour. Drunken soldiers was something she could do without.

"T'was a good thought, M'Lady," Brastias admitted of his enemy. "I'll repeat it for ye. There's bushes enough and a spring."

She stood without expression while her neck was secured and her hands freed. There was an unreality about the freedom, but she accepted it with joy. The leather on her neck was as firmly knotted as before. She wore it without thought of escape.

Her relative freedom lasted through the meal. The broaching of the keg was the beginning.

"The lads will want a bit o' fun before sleep," said Brastias.

She looked her question, fearful she knew its answer.

"You're no tavern wench, girl. But ye can give 'em summat."

To Barbe it seemed the moment she had feared for so long. A thing oft' dwelt on in the mind loses its potency. She faced it forthrightly. "Am I to be raped, Captain?"

Brastias was delighted with her. He slapped his thigh, chuckling at her serious acceptance of the inevitable. "Nay, girl, thou 'art not - more's the pity. But you'll make sweet scenery. Mayhap we'll find thee a job."

A huge Oak on the edge of the small clearing sent a lower limb well out towards the fire. It was the only facility requisite to their sport, the leash was still secure upon her neck. Brastias then threw the coil over the branch and pulled it so that his captive

stood immediately below, with tension enough to keep her there but not enough to threaten breath or distort her pose. She simply stood, tethered by her neck, twenty-five feet from the fire, well illuminated. With a practiced toss or two he snubbed her there.

She trembled. Something brewed. She was sure of intent but not of its form. Barbe looked around the ring of avid faces and knew herself cynosure. All eyes were focused, waiting. Drinks were downed.

"We'll let thee take 'em off thyself, lass."

Brastias words held cynicism and a thick excitement.

The trapped girl looked at him in mute appeal. She still only half guessed.

"Thy clothes, girl! Off with 'em!"

So the moment had come after all! Barbe's heart thumped as though to burst her breast. Yet . . . to ravish a maid standing! It seemed unlikely. But to follow the Captain's demand was a thing unthinkable. She could not contemplate it as a possiblity. Her stricken features sought his.

"Come, girl, I am being kind."

"But I cannot! Never under the eyes of men!"

"None has ever seen thee naked?"

"None! Ever!"

"Then 'tis high time. Thou shoulds't relish it as will we all."

"But to what purpose?" Anything to gain time.

" 'Tis a dark night, lass, and naught to see. They nakedness will be a pleasant thing to view as we drink our ale."

"It's wrong! Will not Lord Galleas . . ."

"M'Lord is far away, and he's a soldier. He'll not begrudge his men a look at a stripped wench."

"But 'tis sinful."

"Has no fat monk shriven thee in privacy, girl?"

"I do not believe such tales. The fathers are kind. Oh please, do not do this. Only harm can come!"

"You mean you'll catch cold?" He was being jocular.

"You know my meaning. Absolve me from being naked before your men."

"You'd feel easier about it with me along?"

"I did not mean that. No man must see me naked save my husband."

"Tell that to a tavern wench or It serving girl."

"I am neither! Oh please!"

"I've taken trouble, lass, to tether thee so thou mayest do thine self what must be done. Or woulds't thee as lief I did it for thee?"

"No! Oh no!"

"Well?"

"I cannot."

"You can. If a man strip thee, there'll be rips and pieces torn. You need your clothes, girl, treasure them."

He was right. If a man's hands did her stripping she would fight. It would be instinctive that she would clutch and hold. She could not stand and let it happen. Her fingers went to the leather round her neck, gauging her helplessness. There would be the morrow and her need to be covered. Her clothes were suddenly her only treasure. Ironically, this realization came only with the demand she part from them.

"My dress alone then?"

"Don't irk me, girl."

"My kirtle too?"

"Naked, girl. Naked!"

Dimly, the captive girl knew herself traversing an ancient path. In each girl's life there must come this time. She had heard confessions that for some maidens their wedding night held horror. But her own nudity had been nurtured all the more closely for lack of a mother to advise and guide. Barbe was distrustful of the giggling confidences of other girls. Her heavily bushed sex and the firm curves of breast and buttock were things she herself had examined only briefly and guiltily in the surface of polished steel. To flaunt them now before a troop of men-at-arms!

"Mercy?"

Brastias did not reply. What she saw in his eye sent her fingers flying to the fastenings of her dress. When it fell around her feet she looked again. The mercy she had asked for was not there.

She cast aside her shoes, changing little. Her kirtle joined her dress. Once more stricken eyes sought his. But she found there no more than an amused contempt that she valued her nudity so highly. He could not fathom her full mortification of spirit in what he would have her do. He had seen enough stripped tavern girls that a hairy sex or curved breast held little novelty. His eye was threateningly demanding. His noose upon the slender neck conveyed its own message.

And the meaning was clear.

Each motion, each little aching was a small death. And Barbe wondered woefully if the delayed breaking of her precious maidenhead could be worse than this agony of flesh and spirit she now embraced. She kicked aside the garments already discarded. They made a pathetic feminine mound beside her feet. To them she added each flimsy bastion of her modesty as she robbed her shrinking figure one by one. The leash upon her neck made it difficult, for she could not bend to deal properly with her nether garb. She was obliged to go as far as she could with her hands and then take over the function of removal with her toes. It prolonged the agony. The soldiers cheered each fumble. She refused to look at them.

There is always the last, the linen that clothes the loins, the fragile custodian of man's eternal need. Reaching it, she faced the now loose lipped Brastias.

"Leave me this, Captain?"

He was bemused by her beauty, his eyes upon her breasts. He shook his head as though it was hard to speak. "No."

She dragged it below her hips. With lascivious motions of her legs and feet she added it to the pile. No sooner had she consummated total shame than one hand flew to cover the shining curled fronds revealed. The other sought a breast. She tried to lean forward in the age old maiden posture of the defense of nakedness. But the leash upon her neck denied.

There came the laughter and the ribald taunts. "I'll cover it for thee, madam."

"Want me to lend a hand?"

"Turn around and let's see thy rump."

She obeyed the order instantly. It seemed a most desirable idea. Her back carried far less shame than breasts and the junction of her thighs. Let the fools ogle her bottom if they must!

"A fine arse!"

"Hey, Captain, let's stroke it with scarlet. I'll cut a willow?"

"If her maidenhead's out o'bounds, how about her rear?"

A cheer went up from the ranks. More ale was passed. Barbe shrank from the hitherto undreamed of possibility now unveiled.

"An' we all get into her behind it'll be a decent size for the next round. What say ye, Captain?"

He allowed a smirk to scar his visage. Brastias was as intrigued as they. But he knew caution.

"She's a sliver of a wench, lads. If she arrive bleeding there'll be a bill to pay we'll none of us relish."

Barbe's heart went out to him. She had beheld the abyss of what seemed the ultimate degradation. To step back from it was a relief. "Captain, is it possible?"

He roared with huge enjoyment. "It is indeed, lass! The biggest cock will enter thee there if it's pushed hard enough and well greased. There's maids who crave it."

It was a day of beginnings and of endings and of shame. Barbe sensed the absurdity of her posture yet had not the courage to change it. Her eye sought the omnipresent Captain, seeking whatever moral support he might be prepared to give. It was little enough, but it ended an impasse. He turned her about to once more face the fire and the glowing eyes. Grasping her hands, he dragged them from their futile task and clasped them at the nape of her neck. "Keep them there!" he admonished, and slapped her seat to emphasize his command and to bounce her erect.

It was not possible! It was wanton! It was a lewd flaunting! A lechery no daughter of Camelford would commit. Barbe's hands flew back to hide what could not be hidden.

There were cheers. Without realizing it, the naked girl had provided the most

prurient of motions of all. The men were delighted.

"A pair more hands, lass, and thee could cover thy arse."

"Cross thy legs and hold thy tits."

"I won't charge thee nothing the first time."

It was fortunate for Barbe that Brastias was enjoying his role of stage director. Each of her despairing gestures to protect her person was a new challenge, a fresh pleasure from the proximity of her pungent nudity. Once again taking her hands he crossed them at the back of her neck and bound them fast with the other taken from her elbows earlier in the day. A couple of the strands went under her collar and were pulled tight with the rest. When he was done, the naked girl had no choice but to stand as he had positioned her with elbows out on each side of her head like wings.

She could do nothing that did no please and draw ribald jibes. Standing erect and facing them defiantly in anger and despair, drawing their approval and comment.

"Look at them tits!"

"The bats get in they bush, lass?"

"Spread thy legs a bit, girl."

Or if she turned her back in disdain:

"She don't like us, she don't!"

"Too good for a soldier, eh! Our cocks not noble?"

"Let's part them cheeks a mite, lads."

They were animals, beasts. But she was powerless. Her hands vainly fought their bonds. If she tried to take a pace in any direction her neck was snubbed so that she must resume her shame. However she stood she saw herself as flaunting those parts of her that should be hidden Each fresh witticism fuelled the lush that proclaimed her chagrin. Yet, deep within her was a thankfulness. She had not been raped. If this shameful exposure appeased their appetites along with the ale she might reach her enforced destination intact. It was a pitifully small solace.

But her travail was not to be easy. When her figure drooped from fatigue and disgust Brastias revived it with a hearty slap across one cheek of her behind. It made a fine slapping sound and brought her erect in short order. Her cheeks flamed anew, her eyes flamed protest.

"That put life in the wench, Captain. Give her another."

Brastias obliged. Her wince and grimace of pain from the stinging impact gave her audience a fresh interest.

"Let's redden her arse, Captain!"

"Can't we have a go?"

"T'lass can't get pregnant I' a hand."

"Warm her up a bit. She could do with it."

Brastias was amused. If he kept the spanks within bounds her rosy response would

fade by the time Gurnie was reached. His lads deserved a bit of sport, the girl could damn well put up with it and count herself lucky. He gestured amiably. "We'll form a line, boys. Once apiece. Pick your cheek. No bruises. Just the flat o' yer hand."

It was pure nightmare! Grotesque, bizarre, not to be borne! But it was happening. It was happening to her. She, Barbe the daughter of Camelford, was standing naked, hands held high to conceal nothing of herself in the firelight, to invite a troop of soldiers one by one to slap her bottom. No wildest story lewdly whispered had prepared her for this. It could not happen . . . It couldn't!

It happened.

At first she felt only shame. But as the calloused hands zestily succeeded each other the smart of her punished cheeks set it aside so that her first concern was with a now familiar enemy: pain. For the men it was a playful game vouchsafed them as a sop for the forbidden privilege of planting their seed within her sex. In that mood, each sought to extract the maximum in sound on impact. To do so might not hurt her as much as a solid thunk but the effect was more erotic and the subject's response doubly pleasing. As ringing slap impinged on hollow spank, the blush on their victim's face began to match the increasing scarlet of her gluteal curves. No matter which way she turned her nakedness each man accommodated himself to the new posture and struck her with immense panache. Quite early in the proceedings Barbe abandoned any twist of her torso which robbed a man of a satisfying slap. When she did this she was firmly grasped round her waist and given one on each cheek as a compensatory lesson. Thereafter she was grateful to rob them of nothing. She wanted no male hands upon her skin nor any additional inflictions. A girl learns fast.

"Nicest little butt I ever laid a hand to."

"What say we do this all night!"

"She'll be hotted up and ready by the time we're done."

"I'll wager she'd willingly spread her legs."

The tormented girl was indeed aware of a new sensation. Physical punishment was new to her. She had seen but not experienced the bite of thong or withe. She could not ignore the heat spreading through her loins. It was separate from the smarting sting but very much coupled with it. Most of the vulgarities passed her by, but she realized that hovering about her plight were implications at which she could only guess. She longed to clasp her hand between her legs in a quest of discovery.

"Another round, Captain?"

"T'lass's rump can stand it."

" 'Tis but a blush she's sporting. Let's liven it up." Brastias delivered a swinging strike that made his victim yelp. She had steeled herself to take what she must without the shame of cries or protests, but it had caught her unexpectedly. His laughing proclamation was even more distressing. "So be it, lads. There's bounce there yet. Ye can warm her up again."

"Oh, Captain, please?"

Barbe gazed at him in urgent appeal. Her bottom was afire, her senses jumbled and aflame. Her piteous plea went out to him from between her raised arms, bent elbows pointing, breasts taut. She turned to regard the men. They had already reformed their line.

"I have been a good prisoner. Why punish me?"

"Come lass, 'tis no punishment you're getting. I'll wager you're wet between your legs."

His jibe seemed to her irrelevant. The thing he now did shocked her to the core. Steadying her shrinking form with one strong arm, he applied a kneading palm below. When she tried to cross her legs he kicked them roughly apart and had his way with her sex. Jubilantly he held his hand for her and all to see. It was wet and shining. He made an exaggerated performance of wiping it on the grass. Her face flamed. She longed to die. Or to live! For some terrible revenge . . .

Anger and chagrin kept her silent as the pain mounted.

She would give the grinning louts no more than she must. She greeted each of them with a level stare of contempt that made some sheepish and others brash.

"She's getting to like it, Cap'n."

"Pity we can't cut a switch and make her dance a bit."

"We're doing ye a favour, lass, and that's a fact."

The single file of avid males dispersed back around the fire as each expended his treasured blow upon the scarlet maiden flesh. A fresh keg was brought. When the last hand had fallen on her buttocks, Barbe knew that in some way her senses were betraying her. The raging conflagration generated by the stinging palms was more than pain. It was consuming her.

"Methinks shoulds't show they gratitude, lass."

What now! Was she expected to thank them! Barbe could not hide the anger she flashed at Brastias from between her elbows.

"We need a serving wench."

So that was it! She was to be degraded more. "With bound hands!" She flung at him bitterly. "I'm no kitchen maid. Is this what your lord Galleas would choose for me?"

"Aye. He'll laugh an' ye complain. There'll be no mark on thy flesh and thy slit's a closed door."

She stood, trembling with mortification, as he loosened her hands and recovered her leash. He tied its other end to the ankle of a sleeping soldier on whom the ale had worked its stupefying spell. She could walk around the fire and to her shielding bush with latitude. It was a beastly tether she would hate and a servitude to make her cringe. But there was no escape. Wearily she reached down for her most treasured covering.

"No!"

She sprung erect and eyed Brastias in shock. "But surely . . ."

"No. Leave them be."

"I must serve those . . . I must serve them naked?"

"Of course. And why not?"

She knew his question was rhetorical, needing only the answer of compliance. Her fingers seeking the band about her neck betrayed her thoughts. But she dared not

disobey. "Show me what to do then," she said sullenly.

"Ye'd like to run, wouldn't thee, lass." Brastias enjoyed her impotence. "But ye'll take Carlin with thee if ye try."

"I'll obey you. Instruct me."

"Take the jug, lass, and fill their mugs. And get that glum look off they face or they'll take it off for thee. Be sweet to 'em. Be the girl you are." He paused as though thinking back through all his soldiering. "They see little enough o' flesh like thine. Don't begrudge 'em a pleasure that costs thee nowt'."

His rough admission with its plea touched her momentarily. It held an unintentional flattery in the implication of the superior quality of her femaleness. She glimpsed a sense of power over the rough creatures round the fire. They could subdue and break her, but in another way they became supplicants. Barbe was learning fast the nature of man.

Her servitude was painful only to her pride. They offered their empty mugs, she filled them. That, in bending to do so, her breasts were thrust intimately before their eyes was an agony she could not avoid. They ogled them hungrily, sometimes a rough finger would flick a nipple that, for reasons of its own, had become hard and demanding. Another man would demand the separation of her legs so that her black muff might be eyed and commented on. But she was not molested. Brastias had a stern word for untoward male enterprise.

"She's ripe, Captain. Let's pluck her."

"A man could get lost in that bush."

"If I can't put my cock in her, how about a mug o' ale?"

"Methinks those swollen lips pout at me."

"If ye can see 'em for hair."

Barbe's blush was not allowed to subside. They found joy in replenishing it with their coarse humour. She trailed her tether back and forth upon her errands. Sometimes a man would grasp it and snub her to a halt. She would then stand forlornly awaiting his pleasure, but the sport was halted by a jovial Brastias on the score of the lost ale. One by one the men fell asleep. The sentries were changed and served. The moment came when her leash was loosened from Carlin's leg. Her pulse quickened. What would be the Captain's disposal of her for the night!

"Please don't bind me more, Captain. My fingers lack the strength to best thy knots. This thong on my neck holds me safe."

He motioned for her to dress. Never had clothes been so quickly donned. She looked up at him hopefully. "I want thee to sleep, lass. 'Tis a thing we all need." He led her to a sapling. Its five inch trunk would serve his purpose.

"Oh no, don't tie me to a tree. I'll never sleep!" Brastias paid no heed. He disposed of her tether by tying its end to an exposed root she could never break. Without other bonds it would hold her for the night. But he was not satisfied. The lass had a spirit he dared not trust. He backed her against the slender trunk.

"Please, I beg of you - to stand for hours tied!" Chuckling at her concern, he passed her arms behind the bole. "Keep they wrists crossed, girl," he ordered amiably.

It was useless to cavil. He would confine her as he wished. Visioning a woeful night ahead, the tired girl crossed her wrists as ordered and stood quiet while they were firmly bound. Brastias took much time with them. His caution bespoke her worth.

"There, you'll be safe enough, M'Lady."

He stood before her assessingly. Barbe was startled. What now! He saw her puzzlement and laughed. "Sit ye down, girl."

The captive was about to refute an impossibility, when she realized it was not an impossibility at all. Gingerly, she lowered herself to the ground. Her bound hands followed. She sat with her back to the bark and looked up inquiringly.

"That's all, lass."

Barbe tested. Her wrists were secure but nothing hurt.

There was no strain. She was a girl who would sleep sitting and resting against a young tree. That her hands were bound behind it was the only anomaly of her plight. Brastias could have made it worse. She looked up gratefully.

"Thank you, Brastias."

He saluted her sardonically and went to the fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

To the captive girl bound upon her horse the forbidding bulk of Castle Gurnie had been a daunting finale to a tiring day. About the castle and within its walls a considerable community flourished. There had been curious eyes a'plenty to note her bonds. Elbows had nudged and eyes cocked knowingly. Beside this demesne Camelford was dwarfed. Brastias had led his troop and his prisoner to the big door of the Keep itself. There he handed Barbe, still bound, to a curious and businesslike young woman who had led her to where she now stood beyond a formidable door.

"Thou art' awaited, M'Lady." The tone was that of a respectful servant. "May I counsel thee to a soft and cautious tongue."

There had been the propulsion of a hand at her back and then the closing of the door. Beyond her was the vastness of the huge stone chamber, a blazing fire in its cavernous grate, and to the left of it a chair. A chair belike a throne, and in it a figure that neither moved nor spoke. The captive stepped forward hesitantly to meet her new owner.

It was not the lord Galleas of Gurnie. It was a woman.

Barbe was beginning to recognize what all slaves must know. For them there is no stability, nothing will ever be as expected or hoped. They are like a garment passed from hand to hand, used when convenient, and kept safe when not in service. For a reason she could not fathom she would have preferred the rough presence of a male to the watchful immobility of the figure in the chair.

"Come closer, girl."

The voice was good, its tone neutral. Cornelia, wife of Galleas, was still young enough and handsome. If Galleas himself was well into middle age, his wife was not. If she was the shrew of her repute she showed it not.

"Thou art' the Lady Barbe of Camelford?"

"Yes, madam."

"And what do you expect of Gurnie?"

"Only that I am captive."

"Thou art' indeed." There was amusement in the words. "Our good Brastias has thee well trussed."

"He is most faithful to your interests, madam."

"Ye have met no harm twixt' Bulaire and Gurnie?" Barbe's scorched seat was past.

"None."

"Ye still have they maidenhead?"

"Yes, madam."

"Come hither and let me see those ropes."

Gratefully Barbe obeyed. She turned her back to invite inspection. Fingers probed and lifted, but touched no knot. Satisfied, they pushed her away.

"Thou art' well tied. 'Tis good for thee."

Barbe was uncertain of the remark. But she wanted most urgently to be free of the ropes that had held her through the day. "May I give thee my parole, madam, and be free of bonds?"

"Don't be a silly girl."

She knew not where her silliness lay, but tried again. "I am in much pain, M'Lady."

"Good!" It was as though she had said something deserving praise.

"I would fain be unbound, madam. Your Captain leashed me safe with a thong about my throat."

There was a trill of laughter. "So thou coulds't piss behind a bush, no doubt. Soldiers are more gentlefolk than we."

The conversation languished. Each assessed the other. "M'Lord Galleas pursues his boar. He is a simple soul of gross habits. You will entertain me 'till his return."

The captive girl sensed ambiguity and knew unease.

"May I ask M'Lord's intent with me, M'Lady?"

Again, the trill of merriment. "I know my own. His is to barter thee for profit - if he forgets thee not. He is an absent minded man. Mayhap I shall inherit thee."

The bound girl's face showed her puzzlement, and knew the Lady of Gurnie was enjoying it.

"Hast' never been slave to woman, child?"

"No madam, I was not a slave until . . ."

"Until Bulaire . . . !"

Cornelia rose and tugged a cord. The same girl appeared as though in wait beyond the portal. "Wash her, she stinks. Prepare her well. Then chain her. You know where."

The sense of unreality, of being lost, of being costly baggage . . . ! Barbe allowed herself to be led by a feminine hand that was neither gentle nor harsh. The girl who owned it was of her own age. Her side glances at her charge were amused and knowing. When they were safe away from authority she softened, and prudently inquired: "Will thee fight an' I free they hands, M'lady?"

"Of course not. What good would it do me!"

" 'Tis natural, M'Lady. I fought, but ye are right, it avails nothing. Gurnie is well peopled and there are the walls and gates. Ye would earn only blows."

Barbe stole a hopefull glance. "I will obey thee. I promise."

The young hands turned about her and busied themselves with knots. "Whoever tied these made thee safe enough. They must have hurt?"

How good the freedom! Barbe stretched and flexed and twisted. She grinned companionably and gratefully. "Fear not, if ye wish to bind me again I'll hold still."

"My name is Gwenneth, Lady. I am the Lady Cornelia's thrall. I have no noble blood. Seeing thee, I am glad of it."

"And I am Barbe. I would have thee for a friend. Tell me what I must do and I will do it."

They embraced. It was a sudden reaction, of sympathy in their lot in Gurnie. Two girls in vastly differing enslavements. Barbe wept a little in relief. How good was this fresh scent of girl after the sweat of men!

There were serving maids with hot water and a tub. Gwenneth soaped and scrubbed and laved. Barbe luxuriated in a brief content. Cleaned and perfumed she sought her clothes but they were gone.

"My clothes?" She looked askance in sudden fear. "We wear these, you and I."

Barbe examined the brief tunic doubtfully. It belted at the waist. On Gwenneth it was undeniably becoming. "But there are no . . ."

"There are not, Barbe. The shift, that is all M'Lady sanctions."

"But it's so . . . scanty?"

" 'Tis better than nakedness. In Gurnie it is easy to be bare."

"But is it seemly? If I raise my skirt . . ."

Gwenneth laughed. "Don't raise it then! It becomes thee well. Thou art more than fair. Come, I have comb and brush, I'll attend thy hair."

There was food and drink and it was good. While she ate, Barbe asked, "What will befall me, Gwenneth?"

"Alas, I do not know. 'Tis rumored you are a pawn in some affair of State. But Milord hunts his boars. Should he scorn to barter thee ye may become as I. The Lady Cornelia fancies thee, I can tell."

"Fancies me!"

"Aye. For her whip and her tongue."

Once more the abyss. The ogre waiting in the dark. Beholding her blank dismay. Gwenneth took her hand and fondled it. "I forget. I have been here since I was taken at fifteen. I have been taught. But thee . . . " The eyes that sought Barbe's held pity and compassion and a hint of love. "For thee it is new and unknown. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive." Barbe's heart was tender for this new found friend. "But I seem a child. In these past days I have been made to feel I know nothing."

" 'Tis knowledge thou woulds't be best without, had they not taken thee." Gwenneth's voice was troubled.

"But I must know."

Gwenneth gazed at her ruefully. "I should have kept silent."

"Tell me that I may be armed. I am more woman than child."

"Maybe 'tis best. At least my tutelage is painless."

"But you spoke of whips? Whips hurt."

"When we have eaten I will instruct you. I'll show you the one." She grinned mischieviously. " 'Tis most easy for me to do. But the other - that I will not do to thee so unless commanded."

"Commanded? What to do?"

"Whip thee. Has't never been whipped?"

The captive eyes widened in dismay. "You jest?"

"I fear not." Gwenneth's features clouded in sorrow.

"In Gurnie a pretty girl knows much of whips and whipping. M'Lady has a fine taste for it, and holds no rein on it."

"But why?"

"For lust. Or pleasure, if you prefer."

"But, what pleasure?"

"For the Lady Carnella it is all the pleasure of the world to lace thy pretty back with scarlet stripes."

"But you . . . commanded?"

Gwenneth shrugged. "It pleases her and shames me. Mostly she watches as I whip a girl under her direction. But sometimes when she is wroth she sends the girl to wherever I may be and I must flog her well." She smiled in depreciation. "Even thee should it so chance."

"I must be witless. I am lost."

" 'Tis simple enough, Barbe. Thou has't never been pierced by man or known its joys. But you know the coupling betwixt what is between our legs and the ugly thing thy carry between theirs."

"I have been told."

"M'lady's favourite game takes its pace. She needs no man, she loathes them. But she needs a girl. For her a girl is more lovesome than any male, and more adept."

"But it cannot be! A girl has no . . . no . . ."

"A girl has a tongue."

It was like a thunderclap. After it the silence. The deep and bitter silence of comprehension. It lasted long. Without breaking it, Gwenneth spread the shattered girl upon a bench. Barbe did not speak, finding refuge in the absence of words. Gwenneth could not speak, her lips and tongue were otherwise employed.

Together they entered a female kingdom of their own.

After the passing of centuries Barbe sat up and, absently began to tidy her hair. She felt certain her sense of peace and well being must be ill-timed. She enjoyed Gwenneth's eyes riveted on her in a smile of repletion.

"I must have the maid perfume thee again," Gwenneth mourned. "Our Lady has a keen scent and might wax wroth."

When it was done and Barbe was led to the distant room she was perturbed. "This is no dungeon . . . it's . . . it's . . ."

"M'Lady's bedchamber." Gwenneth informed drily.

It was luxury beyond Barbe's previous experience. The fireplace bestowed a comforting heat. Lush rugs were strewn everywhere. Gwenneth kicked one aside to reveal a ring set deep in the stone. Going to a chest against one wall she returned with chains. They were heavy, they shone from constant use. The broad bands of their shackles were skilfully wrought. "I am sorry, Barbe, but I must place these upon thee."

Barbe shrugged. "I do not mind. I heard the order. 'Tis what I must expect." She held out her hands.

"There is more than chains. Ye must be naked."

It was less of a shock than it would once have been. With Gwenneth she did not mind. She refused to look beyond the moment. She doffed her tunic, understanding now the virtues of its simplicity. She folded it neatly and set it aside. She hoped for a further use of it.

"These chains are heavy but could be worse, Barbe. See, one locks thy ankle to the ring, the other joins thy hands behind thy back with links enough that ye may use one at the expense of the other. Our Mistress would prefer they be in front, but she fears the use of their weight as weapon. Like this you're helpless."

Helpless! Always helpless. Impotence had become the keynote of her life. With a wry smile the captive girl tested her new bonds, save for their weight, they were painless. The chain behind her back was ingenious. It enabled her to thrust one arm back and the other forward so that she could perform small tasks. She could not lower the

chain and step over. The shackle on her ankle prevented that. The ankle chain was short, a bare two feet. It kept her captive beside the bed but snubbed her short of laying on it. She was beautifully confined.

"The time grows short. I must leave thee, Barbe." Gwenneth took the discarded tunic and placed it on the chest from which she had taken the chains. She surveyed the naked girl in sympathy. "Be not tempted to use a rug for cover or to rob the bed. Our Lady wants thee naked, and that's how you must be. Perhaps in the night she will allow a rug."

Barbe stood irresolute. How does a girl say thanks for being chained! True it was for the manner of it, but words came hard. In a flurry of affection Gwenneth clasped the slender nudity in ardent arms, kissed her soundly and was gone.

Always the unexpected! No dung on this - quite the reverse. Yet the chains upon her wrists and ankle were as heavy as any dungeon would impose. Escape was as remote as ever. Yet the warmth and the luxury and the food and wine were all potent in raising captive hopes. Barbe looked about her appreciatively, then tested her chains. She found that she could scratch her nose. At the moment this was the only useful service her fettered hands could perform, but it was something. She took her single step in each direction. Her ankle was quickly snubbed. But still! Wistfully, she looked upon her folded tunic on the chest. It was as far from her reach as if the Scots had it. She was more acutely conscious of her nudity than of aught else. It was new to her, but seemed an incidental part of slavery. She did not, at that moment, believe she could ever become reconciled to it. Her hope centered on the possibility she would be made bare only before women. Gwenneth, and the Lady Carnella. Experimentally, she discovered the chain upon her wrists permitted one hand to cover something. She had a choice:

One of her breasts or the bush between her legs. Manfully she decided to abandon being coy. If she must be naked she would not also be ridiculous.

"Mayhap I will be pleased with thee."

Cornelia's tribute dragged Barbe back from introspection. She did her best with a curtsy. "I wish to please thee, M'Lady."

"Aye, but the manner of the pleasing is what may save thy pretty skin. My beloved Gwenneth tells me thou art virgin in more ways than one."

"I am what Camelford has made me, Madam. I've supposed myself a hostage held for ransom!"

"Not as a pretty plaything for me! Is that what ye mean? As for ransom!" Cornelia sneered. "Use what name for it ye must, y're no more than a stolen cunt up for offers."

Barbe's face was desolate.

"Come, girl, drop thy dolor. I may mark thee more, but I'll lower thy virgin value less than some doltish man."

"If there are ways I may avoid punishments I would fain use them, M'Lady. I know there is no escape for me."

"Tell me, child. What think ye of me?"

"Thou art passing beautiful."

"And?"

On dangerous ground, Barbe squirmed inwardly. "I find thee much younger than . . . than I . . ."

"Come, say it girl! Than what someone said, ha? What told Bulaire of the witch of Gurnie?"

"T'was not the Lady Malmain, Madam."

"Oh, aye, the noble Jehan. He has a name for me?"

"He called thee shrew, M'Lady."

Cornelia was pleased as though by compliment. She walked idly about the room, rearranging odds and ends in absent fashion. "And thee, child, hast a name for me?"

"You are my Mistress, M'Lady. I address thee only with respect."

"A cautious answer. Thou art' no fool. Tell me now: how obedient are ye?"

Barbe sensed the danger but could not counter it. "I am a slave, madam. A slave must obey."

Cornelia laughed. "I know thy mind, girl. I have sport with thee. There are things you believe you will not do and you hope none will order them? Am I right?"

Barbe visibly shrank from speech. "Yes, M'Lady."

"I would give thee a test."

The naked girl stood tense as though awaiting the thrust of a sword.

"Speak they piece nicely now. Ask me to whip thee." Again the crash of thunder and the flash of fire. Then the silence. What does a chained girl do when confronted with the impossible! Each woman's mind was alive with conjecture of the other.

"I have done no wrong, madam."

"Did I say you had!"

"No . . . but . . ."

Cornelia gloated. The bird was fluttering delightfully in her cage. "Yes, child, you were about to say?"

"Is it not meet that I transgress to earn the whip?"

"Then choose thy transgression."

Barbe knew herself mocked. She guessed her fate.

"Forgive me, M'Lady. Until today I did' not know it pleasured a woman to whip a girl."

"And so?"

"It is hard for me to understand. But if it is a thing I must do, then I ask thee, Madam, to please whip me."

"Oh come, Barbe child! That's as pulling a bit of dubiety as I've ever heard. Try

again."

Barbe longed to cry, to stamp her feet in vexation, to flee the room and the Castle, almost to die. How desolate the rich bedchamber had suddenly become! Looking levelly at the woman who taunted her, she pleaded: "Please, M'Lady. I deem it a great and deep privilege to be by thy hand. I seek thee only."

She was pleased.

"I pray thou whip my nakedness."

"Bravo, girl," Cornelia was seething with lubricity. The reluctant captive had wrought better than she knew. "I will whip thee with a will. But first . . ."

The naked girl stood tense, her small fists at her irksome fetters, while the Lady Cornelia disrobed. To the neophyte in lust the act seemed lunacy. If she herself was to know the lash then why? But as dainty garments joined their fellows on a chair and the undeniable charms of the older woman became more and more evident, the answer, too, resolved itself. Gwenneth had taught her pupil well. What boon it to belabour the inevitable with lame questions!

"What think ye of my breasts, Barbe?"

"I have seen none other, but they seem to me most luscious."

"And my furry slit?"

Milady spread her legs and used pink fingertips to compress soft thighs so that her plump lipped vulva was well displayed. Barbe viewed it with a fascinated horror she did well to mask. "I envy thee, madam, you are most beautiful."

Cornelia, now entirely naked, strode close. Her hand sought the sex of the girl so totally in her power. She palmed vigorously, then examined the result. "Thou art' bone dry, girl. 'Tis the fear and the strangeness. Come, try mine."

It was no easier to comply with the command than ask for the ship. Nor was the physical act accomplished without an awkward positioning and a straining against her chain. Milady stood passive and amused while the timid hand did what it must. When it was withdrawn it was wet.

"You see!" Cornelia exclaimed. "I am readier than thou. Let us become equals."

Breathlessly, Barbe watched, her heart pounding, her mind chaotic with realization, as her new Mistress lifted the lid of the fatal chest and returned flexing a fresh green withe of limber ash, well trimmed and of a ferocious symmetry. Intercepting her victim's agonized stare, she smiled benignly and assured: "I have others, dear girl, should this one wear itself out upon thy pert behind."

So she was not to be whipped! Barbe breathed but a fraction easier. To be struck upon her bare skin with the lash might be no kinder fate; she did not know. She cherished little hope of being heroic.

"Bend well down, child."

Child! How apt. Barbe did as bid, and felt as foolish as afraid.

"Arch thy back well and get those hands up." The ash enforced the demand and pushed the chain clear of the innocent cheeks.

It was something that should never happen, but had. It was the unknowable made

real. It was a nightmare while awake. It was the most searing pain the chained girl had every known. She could scarce believe in it, so great and terrible it was. She made no cry, but jerked erect by instinct, her hands seeking her wound as her bemused mind told her over and over that a woman had struck her bottom with a length of ash and was like to repeat the stroke again and again. She looked askance into Milady's lowering eyes and said, though she knew not why: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Cornelia was enraptured. Here was the damsel of her dreams. This naked beauty in her punished innocence would fuel forever the fire of concupiscence now raging in her sex. Tenderly her hand sought the missing secretions at the junction of the white thighs. Finding little enough she used her palm, her fingers and her skill until the chained maiden gasped in a reaction she could not control.

"Bend thee down again, child. I take pride in thee."

It was worse! Barbe's heaving gasp sent her breasts into panting protrusions. She was shocked when her fingers found the raised ridge of flesh across her bottom. She stood quivering and not daring to move while Milady's gentle palms lovingly frictioned nipples now inexplicably rampant. She knew herself a mariner upon an uncharted ocean of sensation. When the searching hand sought evidence it came back wet.

"Enough for now, dear girl. Come, pleasure me." Milady happily lay back upon her bed, her seat upon its edge, her legs splayed wide. "Thy chain is long enough, child."

Barbe's chain was amply long.

The girl knew guilt. She knew shame. She examined both while employing lips and tongue. But she found an all encompassing excuse for what she was busily doing in the two flaming ridges of flesh raised by the rod. Suppose the strokes went on and on! She dared not think of it!

When Milady had ridden her chariot to the stars and lay pantingly acquiescent in the afterglow of lust, some - instinct told Barbe to remain kneeling and to rest her blushing cheek upon the wet and pungent lips she had boldly entered. Chained as she was she could not use her arms to clasp the hips or her hands to find the luxuriant breasts. She leant, kneeling, and rested from her labour. It was better than standing in her bonds and feeling de trop. She glimpsed how dog-like a slave girl could become, forever governed and dependent upon the motions and whims of whoever owned her.

"Who taught thy skill, child?"

Milady sat up and lovingly fondled the dark haired head nestling within her loins.

"Only thee, Milady. Gwenneth told me all I did not know. I did what I had been told to please thee."

"Not because of that fine ash wand?"

"No, Milady. I think ye used it on me for other reasons."

"And what would they be, Barbe?"

"That I might feel some of that which you feel. I do not understand all these things yet."

"But you wish to?"

"Yes, M'Lady."

"You sound hesitant, child."

"I am frightened."

"Of me?"

"No, M'Lady. I am fearful of slavery. I am but a girl. There have been so many names and faces, and ropes upon my arms. So much unknown."

"I could curse Bulaire, child. But since that lout Jehan brought you to me I'll not condemn him. And now, if M'Lord Galleas could content himself with killing his boars and his stags and leave thee to me . . ." She sighed pensively.

They stayed as they were, the woman on the bed, the girl kneeling within the shelter of her thighs. With the feminine fingers stroking her hair and caressing the nape of her neck, Barbe knew an unexpected contentment. She had no wish to move. She had become accustomed to her new shackles. They did not bother her . .

"Feel thy cunt, child."

"It is wet, M'Lady."

"Good. Lay thee down upon the rug."

In a maze of wonder and excitation the girl obeyed. She lay quiet as cushions and rugs were thrust beneath her to suit Milady's need. When her legs were thrust asunder and the hungry lips found the inflamed center of her being she closed her eyes.

Barbe rode her own golden chariot into the sun.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Damn ye, woman, must ye meddle?"

The lord Galleas of Gurnie paced angrily, dark-visaged frown aimed at his wife. Barbe stood timidly in her scanty tunic and trembled. She felt, more than ever, a piece of merchandise.

Milady was unperturbed. "Go back to thy beloved boars, man, and leave the girl to me."

"To nibble thy cunt!" He made a gesture of disgust. "I could lend thee one of my hounds."

"T'would be better than a man."

Galleas shook his head in mock despair. "Look at her!" He pointed accusingly at his unwilling audience. "Not a cord, not a chain, nothing! I suppose she shares thy bed?"

"She's safely chained through the night. Have no doubts on't. Your expensive little pigeon will not fly away."

"But to walk untrammelled . . . free!" The lord of Gurnie's honest indignation robbed him of words.

"Go dowse thy anger in a butt of mead. Dos't expect me to leave the child limping about with a bushel of iron dragging at her heels." Cornelia had whetted her own righteousness to a fine edge.

"The maid should not walk at all. She should be safe in a dungeon and well confined in gyves."

"And naked too, I wager?"

"Ay. Don't tell me you've not had her so."

"Think of thy gold, man. It will shrink each day you keep her in some dark hole in chains. Chantylon, nor any other, will buy a skeleton."

"The girl can be well fed and tended. Shell grace our keep no more than a few days." He turned to the shrinking witness of his domestic strife. "What say thee, child? Will a week's clipping of thy wings destroy thee?"

"I do not know, M'lord," she hesitated uncertainly then added: "I give thee my word I will be dutiful to thy lady an' ye leave me unfettered."

"Tush and rubbish! Ye'd fly the first wind of chance and I'd not blame thee."

Galleas had adopted the air of a man much set upon. His spouse's next suggestion helped not at all.

"Leave the girl as she is. I'll stand hostage for her. An' she escape, then chain me I' the dungeon in her stead."

"A fine piece of Minstrel gossip that would make! We'd be a laughing stock." Galleas scowled and added fervently, "Not that a month below could do aught but improve thee."

"Well?" Cornelia's voice was taunting. "Accept my offer. Ye cannot lose. An' the lass escape, I'll not lament my bargain."

"Enough!"

Barbe felt his exasperation. She saw Cornelia flinch. The lord of Gurnie had evidently reached the limit of his tolerance for female foolishness. Her heart plummeted at his brusk gesture of dismissal.

"Ye'll have the girl safe within the hour, woman. See to it. I've other things to do. I'll call upon the lass and if she be not well confined, I'll double and treble what she lacks."

Barbe knew his noisy stamping from the chamber was a retreat from his wife's acerbity. But it was also an edict. One the lady Cornelia was not likely to counter. Dolorously she turned to the fuming woman who had been her champion. "Thank you, M'Lady. Be not grieved for me."

The older woman smiled in recognition of sincerity. "He is a stupid dolt. But he is Lord of Gurnie and my husband. 'Tis a cursed thing to be a woman. His will governs thee."

Once again Barbe nestled within the shelter of Cornelia's need. This time she had her arms and hands. Knowing she might not have them long she used them fervidly in gratitude. She used her lips. When Gwenneth came she allowed herself to be led away. " 'Tis no more than is custom," Gwenneth consoled sadly. "M'Lady could shelter thee only while her lord was absent with his hunt. What I must do now is but

a thing delayed."

Barbe pressed the young hand in affection and surveyed her new home. She supposed there might be worse. There was a small barred window and some light. For the rest it was dungeon enough. The rings set in the stone were daunting to a captive girl.

"It shames us both, but I must leave thee naked, Barbe."

With a wry grin of resignation the prisoner slid out of her single garment and saw it hung upon the wall. "Happily there'll be need of it anon," Gwenneth offered hopefully. "And now, my dear, I must chain thee."

"Indeed you must," Barbe contrived faint humour as she told of the domestic exchange that had decided her fate. "Ye had best show me no kindness in what ye do. I'd not relish Milord's wrath."

Gwenneth gravely considered the naked loveliness as though in the fitting of a gown. "The ankles and the wrists most surely," she conceded. "We begin with them."

It was another of the moments: a chapter beginning and ending. A dungeon and its chains! Barbe had beheld its imminence since Bulaire. Like anything long threatened, there was a sense of relief in its actuality: The captive's hopes that perhaps after all it might be less than the threat itself. She thrust forth a submissive ankle.

"How small a girl's are," Gwenneth mused as she busied herself. "When first I saw these shackles I did not believe they could circle us. But they do. Whoever fashioned them had much skill. They are not rough and ugly like those used on men."

The naked girl watched the joining of her feet. It was not a new experience. She remembered Bulaire and Renan the smith. But these chains had locks and, even though as heavy, had a cruel beauty as she kicked at them to make the links swirl and test the short step before the snub.

Holding out limp wrists, Barbe smiled at Gwenneth's evident distaste for what she must do. The metal bands were snug. With her hands locked in them there fell upon the captive girl a sense of loss. Hope had fled with the snaps of the closing locks. Confined thus, freedom had become naught but a pretty dream. "Why is the locked door not enough, why must a girl also be chained?" she asked wonderingly.

" 'Tis part to punish," Gwenneth admitted in vexation.

"But should one befriend thee and unbolt the door the chains would still hold thee. There is naught of escaping ye can do as ye now are."

It was true. In morbid curiosity the fettered girl essayed a passage round her prison. The pathetic effort banished all thought of escape.

"I would like to leave thee thus, Barbe," Gwenneth mused slowly. "But if Milord's temper is so roused . . ."

It was a ring. From it two chains went to the ankles and two to the wrists. When they were fastened Barbe could raise her hands no higher that her waist. It made certain she would assault no one. It was also an additional weight to close the door of hope.

"Thou art helpless standing, Barbe. But on the floor with thy knees bent there is a small slack by which your fingers may find thy face and hair."

The captive stood tense, fists clenched and pulling against the new infliction. Helpless indeed! She looked at the girl who had chained her, eyes misty with held back tears.

"Thank you, oh thank you," she managed brokenly. "I know you have been kind. I'll be all right." She forced a grin. "Even were I free of these things there is naught to do within these walls. I shall not mind too much."

Their parting kiss lasted a long time.

It was very quiet. The fettered girl moved her shackles from time to time to break a silence fraught with fear. A few bits of sacking offered an inadequate comfort, but she gathered them and used them to recline. They were more sympathetic than the stone. She sat with raised knees so that she might rest her arms upon them or cradle her face in her hands. The simple motions had become privileges to be treasured. She had never experienced such helplessness. The cords of Brunet and Brastias and hurt far more than the chains in which she was now locked, but they had lacked the cold impersonal implacability of metal. She settled herself to a waiting she knew would seem forever.

"Humph!" Galleas viewed his feminine hostage without approval. "Stand up, girl, and let's see what's been done with thee."

Naked before a man! But why cavil! To protest would earn her but a cuff or some vulgar reference to her sex. Obediently she arose and took a small pleasure in allowing the weight of her chains to drag her hands down upon her pubic hair.

But her master would not be cheated. "Lift thy hands, girl. Ye can."

He surveyed the bared bush now framed by chain. "A good cunt," he observed meditatively. "And the rest of ye . . . ye'll no be in this dungeon long, lass. Ye'll sell well."

"Yes lord."

He was pleased by her acquiescent obedience.

"Were it not for that vixen above, I'd keep thee, child," he confided gruffly. "You're a pleasure to a man. But every time I turned my back she'd be at thee or thee at her. I'll not waste gold for that."

"These chains are heavy, Lord."

"Aye, and so they should be."

If he had caught the appeal in her voice he ignored it. He indulged in a prolonged study of her naked femaleness and the bounds by which it was contained. Suddenly struck by some omission he exclaimed: "Damn me, girl, ye can walk away from there!"

Barbe's heart sank once more. His seemingly irrelevant remark presaged but one thing. Unhappily, she watched his search and his selection.

"I'm helpless now, lord. Please chain me no more."

"I'll be the judge o' that."

"I'll give my word, Lord. It would not be broken."

"Nor will these chains, lass."

The prisoner once more felt the compulsion to scream, to stamp her feet, to lash out at male insensibility. Barbe shrewdly suspected this insistence on adding to her travail was no more than living up to his earlier threat. His voice was gruff, but it

held no hostility. Impotently she watched his advance with collar and chain. When the collar was made fast upon her neck and the chain secured to the ringbolt in the stone, Galleas stood back in satisfaction. He had made his point. The tethered girl longed to kick his male complacency.

"Thou'll no be leaving us, lass."

A fatuous remark. He was gloating. "No, lord, I am well chained."

It was what he wanted, an assurance of his masculine omnipotence. An acceptance by the inferior female that what he had done to her was right and clever and most essential to her good.

"Ah, I'll be leaving thee then. Ye'll have things to think on and time to do it. I've no doubt ye'll be visited."

"Thank you, lord."

Barbe watched him go. Chained as she was, the thud of the door meant little. Her captivity was manifold. Curiously, her hands went instantly to her neck. The collar was rough, but its metal smooth. The lock repulsed her fingers. The hanging weight of the chain to the wall was onerous. She discovered she could make it more bearable by twisting the collar so that its ring rested beneath her chin. The links of its tether she looped on a breast or an arm, but what did it matter! What did anything matter! It was only much, much later she remembered she had not been whipped. She wondered why.

It was dusk when she discovered her scarf.

There had been one visitor. Gwenneth had brought food and drink and told of a continuing domestic battle. The time was not propitious for dalliance. She had kissed and gone.

As the day faded and the dungeon gloom threatened the dark, the captive girl bethought her of sleep. It was in the search for whatever scraps might cushion against the coldness of the stone that she saw the small bundle in the corner of the wall. Her chained neck almost preventing her from reaching it. But fighting the links and teasing it within her grasp, her heart leaped in recognition. It was the flimsy thing she had thrown from the tower room of Bulaire in response to the minstrel's song.

It was one more enigma, the hand of the unforeseen.

She knew not whether it was good news or bad or who could have put it there. Clumsily, in her chains she shook out its full length. The keys fells on the floor at her feet.

Keys!

With racing pulse she picked one up. A moment later she turned it in its lock. Her hands were free! Another loosened her feet, a third her neck! The remaining one was huge. She guessed its use. It was then she saw a scrap of parchment. It was a map. Crudely drawn, but legible when she carried it beneath her dungeon's bars. She studied and memorized it. Then donned her tunic and thrust the big key in the door.

It was a heart throbbing moment. If Gwenneth had thrust home the bolts she was still captive and would perforce be obliged to chain herself again to allay suspicion. But Gwenneth had been kind, or lax, or motivated by a purpose of her own. The huge lock turned, the massive door allowed itself to be pulled back. Barbe of Camelford took her first step into a hazardous freedom.

Her flight was breathlessly slow. The map was her only weapon. The castle servants were her main concern until she realized that, attired as Gwenneth was attired and since she was unknown, she could walk carelessly as though belonging.

It worked. Even the main gate gave her no pause. The sentry gruffly reminded her of curfew and left it at that. Barbe walked blithely down the dusty road. She dared not run.

There were houses and short streets, shops and taverns and torches. But the falling night gave anonymity to all. The map pointed a path out beyond the environs of Gurnie. At the end of it there was nothing but an 'X'. She would have to take her deliverance on trust.

The Abbey was a sizeable pile of stone. She had noted it on her ride into the thraldom of the castle. It was also marked upon her map. But there were other guides. It was but one more place to speed past in the gloom.

The sibilant "Pssst!" repeated again and again like the hissing of a snake slowed her steps. There was a gate of latticed iron, beyond it a figure so manifestly not hostile that the fugitive approached. Drawing near, Barbe beheld the habiliment of a nun.

"Come."

The voice was softly feminine but urgent. The gate opened in a silent invitation.

"I cannot. I have an errand."

" 'Tis known, child. Danger awaits thee. Go, enter."

"I am in haste." Barbe was confused by the unexpected. "You do not know –"

"We know your need of sanctuary, child. The Abbey offers sanctuary. Within these walls none can touch or take thee."

"But –"

"Come, hasten. I hear horses!"

The fleeing girl had, herself, heard the thud of hooves.

With a sob of thankfulness she slipped through the small door. It gently closed, the lock turned reassuringly and a soft feminine hand drew her into the shelter of the wall while two horsemen galloped past outside.

"I am Sister Eulalie. And you, child?"

"Barbe of Camelford, Sister."

"So!" There was knowledge in the exclamation. "Thou art' far astray?"

How good was a woman's voice and a woman's gentle hand! As she was led to the Abbey itself, Barbe's being was irradiated with the joyous prospect of reunion with her father. To the Church all things were possible. She stumbled with her words. "I am so grateful. If you can take me home?"

Sister Eulalie squeezed the small hand she held. It was a comforting feeling for the girl quivering from fright. "I'll take you to the Abbess, my child. The reverend Mother will counsel thee."

It was a harbour after storm, a place of women. The massive wall was between her and her enemies and they could not see it. Barbe glowed in exultation. She followed gladly where she was led.

"Thou art' too fair to see. I wonder not thou are pursued."

The Abbess pensively surveyed the glowing suppliant. Barbe returned her gaze with awe. Had it not been for the vestments of her office the Reverent Mother would have borne a type resemblance to the Lady Cornelia. There was a similarity, too, in the room. The blazing fire, the tapestries, the soft comforts.

"Thou hast done well Sister. The girl pleases us." The Abbess smiled benignly on Sister Eulalie. "You may leave us now. When you return bring Sister Cornelia with you."

Alone with the vibrant personality of the Mother Superior, Barbe felt inadequate. She had known naught of Convents other than by hearsay, and that had been a little frightening it its tales of austerity and penance. But this room was not as she would have supposed. It spoke of wealth.

"Sit at my feet, Barbe, and tell me thy story."

How warm it was upon the rug before the fire! After Galleas's dungeon she felt as a pampered cat. She told her story. All of it, omitting nothing. If her fleshly acts with the Lady of Gurnie led her to penance in this religious refuge she would perform them gladly. While she told of these matters she stole a glance at the lovely face illuminated by the flames. It was serene and attentive to her tale. When it was done, there were questions. She answered them readily.

"There is food and drink upon the table dear child."

Barbe became aware of honest hunger. Relief, freedom and hope had spurred appetite. She ate with gladness. The food was rich, the wine heady stuff. If this was convent life the tales were false.

"You are very beautiful, my child."

Someone else had said it in the same way. Barbe shrugged off the memory. Being beautiful had gained her only pain.

"Has a man pierced thee, Barbe?"

"Nay, Reverend Mother, I am a virgin still."

It was an uncomfortable topic that no one was willing to let lie. The next question was no better.

"The flesh of a woman, child. Did it pleasure thee?"

"I believed it better than a man."

"That was not my question."

"Yes, it gave me pleasure. Did I do wrong?"

The Abbess smiled. "We will deal with that another time. Tell me what is thy most ardent wish?"

"To return to Camelford and my father. Please help me."

"Camelford and not the Lady Cornelia, or the maid Gwenneth?"

How strange a question! Barbe turned to she who had uttered it. But the face of the Abbess betrayed nothing other than enquiry.

"No, Reverend Mother. They were kind to me. But Gurnie offers naught but ill. Being a hostage is only slavery."

"Kind, you say. Yet she whipped thee?"

Barbe flushed guiltily. She was not sure in her own mind about those ridged weals upon her flesh. "She meant well by it, Reverend Mother. Perhaps I deserved it. I am much confused."

"Confusion is meet at thy age and in thy plight, dear girl. Mayhap our Abbey can give thee understanding."

The Abbess smiled sweetly and said to the two Sisters who had entered: "Take this child and bind her tightly to the post."

Barbe fought with all the fury of her young strength. Illusion was stripped away by the curt directive. Whatever this place might be, it had trapped her falsely and with malice. It might offer sanctuary against whatever lay beyond its walls, but menace was now implicit in all she had seen and heard. The summons for Sister Celia was explained.

It took the strength of both the Sisters to subdue and lead her away. Barbe was bereft by her betrayal. She could see now only bleak horror, the exchange of one captivity for another. Quite probably she would be returned to Gurnie when these women had done what they wished with her. The thought appalled. She would be punished and loaded with chains so that she could scarce move. She bit and scratched and kicked.

It was a bare chamber save for the post. It had a crosspiece on its top forming a 'T'. There were straps. They took her tunic, being careful not to tear it, cuffing her in a sobbing acquiescence while they spread her arms and strapped them to the cross. Wrists and arms and waist. The straps were buckled tight so that Barbe stood nakedly exposed. She could move nothing save her feet and head. She gazed at the two women who had fastened her, finding only horrified amazement within herself and bland cherubic smiles on the faces of the Sisters. "Why, why, why'!" she pleaded agonizedly. "What have I done?"

"You are very beautiful." said Sister Eulalie. Both kissed her and went away.

They had left a small lamp, a tiny wick steeped in oil.

It enabled the bound girl to look the length of her arms and behold the bands of leather deep in her flesh. She spread her fingers, then clenched her fists. The straps held her tightly. In a fury of great anger, she surged against the band, striving with every muscle and sinew to find a weakness, some lack she could exploit. It was as though the serene features of the Abbess mocked her futile efforts. Sobbing, she relaxed in defeat, a lovely naked girl standing desolate with outstretched arms.

What now! Barbe asked herself the question again and again as she stood statuesque against the post. She could make nothing of any of it. She was a fragment tossed on the waves of lust and greed. Such kindness as she had found was fleeting. The women of the Abbey and their motives were still to explore, but the clutch of her bonds offered little hope of well being. Freedom was gone again as were her dreams of Camelford. She wept, her tears falling on her naked breasts. They gave a brief surcease. Sagging against the straps she slept.

"You are most beautiful, Barbe."

The familiar words had become a litany to which the captive had no response. Sincere or not, they did not matter. All that mattered was her bondage. She had dozed throughout the night: now in early morning she faced the infuriating serenity of the Abbess's amused regard. "Please untie me." It was all she could think.

Sister Eulalie joined them. "The poor child. Her breasts released, Sister." The Abbess gave the information as though commenting on an aberration.

"She is indeed a treasure," Sister Eulalie breathed.

"Her night on the post has done her good. I have always found it salutary with young women."

"Do you wish her scourged, Reverend Mother?"

"Of course. If Satan's there the lash will find him."

"Her breasts, what are your wishes to be Reverend Mother?"

"No, not her breasts. The child is a novice. You may turn her round."

"No!" The word burst from the captive lips like a bomb. "Don't whip me. I've done no wrong. It's cruel!" Barbe was desperate and outraged. "You're not nuns, you can't be. Nuns would not treat me so."

"Perhaps she has not stood there long enough." the Abbess mused without emotion. "What think thee, Sister?"

Sister Eulalie beamed good will. "Perhaps after her scourging. With your permission I will attend her needs and summon thee?"

"So be it." The Reverend Mother gently kissed the startled captive's forehead. "Thou are' in good hands, my dear. I will rejoin thee anon." She swept from the room as though all was well with the world.

Sister Eulalie clasped a loving hand on her captive's sex. "Isn't it lovely, dear child. I am so glad you came to us."

"I didn't come to you, I was trapped. Let me go!"

The bound and naked girl was bewildered. The Abbey was a madhouse. She could not adjust to its inconsistency. "I am sure you were sent here by a loving providence, child. I will chain thy feet."

"I don't want my feet chained. I want to be set free."

"Anger becomes thee, Barbe. My cunt is wet."

"Stop! Oh stop! Ye cannot be a nun. To speak thus–!"

"With chains upon thy sweet ankles I will need to whip thee but little to gain obedience."

"You don't need to chain me, and you don't need to whip me. If you can treat me as a woman of nobility I'll cause you no trouble."

"Pride flourishes before a scourging," Sister Eulalie intoned sententiously. She held up the ankle shackles for inspection. They had a dishearteningly familiar

appearance to the girl who would wear them. "We are going to love each other, dear girl."

"There'll be naught of love and I'll bear those things or feel the lash." Barbe declared vehemently.

Sister Eulalie kissed her tenderly. Kisses seemed to be the common tender of the Abbey. Bound as she was. Barbe could escape none of them. She looked stonily ahead and refused arousal as the kisses lowered themselves to her nipples. She refused to fight the straps. She suspected the good Sister would enjoy it if she did. She did not kick or seek evasion when the capable hands clamped the metal bands about her ankles, their chain was short.

"It is so wise to keep thee helpless in thy early days," Sister Eulalie explained happily. "I will get the whip."

It was an evil length of leather, limber and well used.

Barbe shrank against the post at sight of it. Her breasts were heaving in a conflict of emotions as the straps that had bound her through the night were loosened. To run! To fight! To fall to her knees and beg! The question was decided by her first glad step away from the brutal post. The chain between her feet sprang taut instantly and she fell forward. Sprawling on the ground she pathetically viewed her feet. They were so closely linked that resistance would be absurd. What good her hands if she could but stumble impotently from the scourge or the grip of others! She was captive.

"There, you see. Isn't that lovely, dear child! Thou cans't not gainsay us. I am so happy for thee. Come, take my hand and rise."

Barbe was certain now that Sister Eulalie was mentally deranged. She allowed herself to be helped to her prisoned feet. Her eyes were bright with tears of frustration and despair. She would never escape, never! The whip seemed now more certain in the Abbey than in Castle Gurnie. She thought desolately of the map, now lost, and of whoever had waited at the spot marked 'X' for a girl who did not come.

It was a hobbled demeaning journey to the kitchen where she was washed and fed and her needs attended to. Sister Eulalie held her hand and shortened her own steps to match those of the chained girl. "Thee will need to piss, child. Come, here is the place."

The Abbey was without inhibitions. A spade was a spade. Those who served in the kitchen discussed the new captive's female attributes and moral background with a warm interest that both encouraged and repelled.

"A luscious cunt if ever I saw one. More porridge, dear?"

"And those tiny teats, they'll blossom well."

"She'll cry sweetly 'neath the scourge."

"What devils our Abbess will expel!"

"Has't been purged of Satan, child?"

Barbe did her best to cope. There were moments when she could believe it all some monstrous joke. The food was good and plentiful. She was served royally. The placid faces beamed. But there were chains upon her feet and they were heavy. At a side table there was another like herself, a youngish girl, naked save for a scrap about her waist. Her feet, too, were hobbled by shackles, but their linkage slightly longer to enable her to perform her kitchen tasks. This girl sent glance after glance of

sympathy to the newcomer as she went about her duties, but she did not speak. The Sisters ignored her. With a thrill of horror, Barbe recognized the inflamed stripes across the girl's back were the marks of a whip.

"May I have my tunic please?" Barbe asked when the meal was done.

"Why?" Sister Celia sounded faintly shocked.

" 'Tis but seemly. A girl should not go naked."

"Not beyond the wall, child. But within the Abbey–!" Again the implication she was being silly, that she should have known better than to utter the gaffe.

"How should we keep thee, dear, save bare. 'Tis best for bonds, and for the scourge, and that ye be ready for our love."

There could be no answer. The talk of zanies needs no reply. Yet these women were not truly insane. The captive felt they were beyond a wall, a wall they would drag her across into their own female world of sexuality and perhaps pain. Barbe's heart was leaden as she felt the guiding hand beneath her arm, but she rose dutifully and took her hobbled steps.

It was a chapel. But like none other. This one was bare of all the symbolism of the Church. There were the benches and the pews. There was the altar at the end of the central aisle of the nave, beyond it was the clerestory prominent above its several steps, in effect a stage. It was there the guiding hand dropped away to leave the naked girl standing alone, her body bathed in the light rays slanting from the high windows. Far to either side of her were columns, joined above her head by a scrolled transverse to form a horizontal arch.

"We are all so pleased to have you with us, dear," Sister Eulalie breathed excitedly. "You won't mind being examined? They all want to love you so much."

Typical nonsense. Barbe was free to turn and noted a trickling influx of nun-like figures. Some took seats, others mounted the shallow steps and walked round and round her slowly and bestowed twinkling smiles their recipient could not interpret. Barbe quashed the instinct to try and cover herself. She stood erect and smiled back, everything was absurd. So absorbed did she become in this ridiculous exercise that the ropes were firm upon her left wrist before she realized she was being bound. Sister Celia looked up from the task and nodded approvingly.

Fight! Protest! She had done both and lost. They had her. What they wished done would be done. Her hobbled feet ensured it. She passively offered Sister Eulalie her other hand and watched it bound. When the busy sisters mounted chairs to loop her new tethers through the widely separated rings on the underside of the crossbeam above her head, she watched that too. Everyone present watched it as though it was a sacred ceremony. When the ropes were pulled and pulled so that her hands and arms rose and stretched in a posture of adoration, a giant sigh rippled its way through the still air. When she was forced to stand upon her toes to ease her tensioned arms the tethers were tied fast to hold her thus. When the two Sisters who had accomplished this small miracle stepped down and removed their chairs the whole assemblage applauded by a genteel clapping of feminine palms.

Barbe had been tied facing the nave. Standing on tip-toe she was able to watch the gentle flow of Sisters come and go. There was a whisper of tittering conversation too hushed to catch. There was also a constant traffic from the audience to mount the steps and examine her. She was sure there were those who returned again and again. There could be no denying their interest. It was her sex. Gravely in an absorbed attention they fingered her and used their palms to cup and to squeeze and fondle. Always they nodded their heads in a mysterious confirmation as though they had

discovered on her appendages they themselves lacked. They always smiled.

Nothing happened.

It was a punishment. Barbe had originally supposed she was tied thus for the promised scourging. Certainly she was ideally positioned for the cruelty. All of her was open. But the manner of her binding was painful. A girl cannot stand forever on her toes. More and more her tied wrists took on the burden of her weight. Soon they were bands of fire she longed to ease. She looked despairingly up her pinioned arms to where the ropes cut deep. She could touch nothing; she was utterly helpless and delivered to whatever lay in wait. Her shoulders told her of their own wracked grief in the side stretch of her bound hands. She gazed in eloquent appeal at each smiling face.

It was but a week since that no man nor woman had beheld her nakedness. It had been something thought of as a hidden treasure, a treasure she might never spend, a thing to cherish. She herself had been unaware of the hidden potential of her body and its sensitivities. Now she was spread and suspended naked for all to enjoy. These were women, but men had seen her too. Only chastity remained, she had been robbed of all else. As the feminine fingers of the Abbey caressed her most secret places, the naked girl became frantically aware of their effect upon a faculty only recently discovered. She was becoming increasingly aroused by the incessant attention. The pain and her strained posture should have countered it, but they did not. She was young and ardent and designed for love. She fought the rising tide in an agony of concern that these strange creatures, whatever they were, should not behold her blossom into orgasm. If it happened she would feel herself shamed beyond redemption.

It happened.

In the end, Barbe cared not. She surrendered utterly to the female ministrations. She closed her eyes in an enforced ecstasy and writhed and moaned and cried aloud in such abandon as to rivet upon her nudity every eye in a rapt fascination of adoration. When she slumped against her bonds, head bent and hair awry, there came again the tribute of the clapping of the hands and a vast sigh of sympathy. Her wrists burned in agony.

The Abbess made an entry. It commanded silence and attention. Every face followed her majestic passage down the aisle. She skirted the altar, mounted the steps, and stood surveying her flushed and sweating victim. When their eyes met it was possible for the girl to believe she had seen the reflection of love.

There were no words, no prelude. None were needed.

In a single sweeping gesture the Abbess loosened the clasp at her throat and cast aside the entire coif and habit of her rank. She stood as naked as the girl she was about to whip. The only sound was the sibilance of indrawn breath.

Barbe herself stared in a hypnotic compulsion at what was revealed. The body of the Abbess was magnificent. It might have been her own in some future firm maturity. Each curve and plane held symmetry and female strength. It was a dazzling revelation of loveliness. Crowning it was the hair the coif had hid. A golden cascade. Where a nun's bald shaved pate should have been was only beauty.

There was a hypnotic air about the proceedings that held the tethered girl mute. A force had been unleashed. It would run its course. When the Abbess picked up the whip Sister Eulalie had left upon the floor her only response was an inhalation of pure fear. Her breasts heaved.

The lash had a classic beauty. The naked arm swept back and forward in utter

grace, but with a fearsome speed. The bound girl, waiting, had looked back across a raised arm to behold that which was about to be done to her, but in quick revulsion she turned her head to face the nave and closed her eyes. The heavy thong cut across her back above her breasts.

The Lady Cornelia's ash had conditioned the captive.

Barbe had known from the start it would be awful beyond imagining. A girl's bottom is one thing, her back is something else, nor did the ash have the cruelty to curl and snap as did this whip. Beneath a girl's naked back lie structures of bone and muscle that give no cushion to the flesh. The first whiplash Barbe had ever known would live in her memory forever.

Save for a gasp of utter shock, she made no sound. But her nakedness gave evidence enough of its protest against the unbearable. Her wrists were punished with her back as she writhed, her ankle chains clinking an appropriate accomplishment to her anguish.

The strokes placed themselves in neat scarlet lines across the white skin, each falling below the last, one of them curling to flick a breast. As with her orgasm, Barbe gave up playing the stoic and allowed her punished torso to respond as best its bonds allowed to the unrelenting succession of lashes. She did not scream, but from time to time her toes left the floor as her arms contracted in a futile striving to lift the punished flesh to a non-existent refuge. When the seventh crimson ridge proclaimed itself at the small of her back, the whipping stopped.

The passing of the kiss of whips is never instant. The moments tick away as the agony recedes. With her toes once more finding solid stone, the whipped girl spared a glance for those who watched. Their eyes burned, their lips were lax, they leaned forward in their pews in a rapt intensity. Sister Celia rose and advanced to the clerestory. She carried a small cedar box, exquisitely ornate.

Realization of what was being done to her came slowly. Barbe was still absorbed by the whip and its aftermath. But any pain asserts itself, and this new one, though not severe, was not to be ignored. Startled, she looked down in disbelief at the woman kneeling at her feet.

Sister Celia was plucking her pubic hair.

Barbe's instinct was to scream or laugh in hysteria. Instead, she turned appealing eyes upon the naked woman with the whip. The response was the common one for the Abbey, a warm smile of affection. Her attention was forced back to the small nagging burns as each hair was drawn slowly so as to stretch its anchorage to the limit before it parted from the unwilling flesh and was lovingly deposited in the cedar box. Sister Celia thrust the nearly suspended legs further apart so that she might pluck the shining threads from the total area of the naked sex. Satisfied with an even dozen, she then rose and bestowed her attention to the bound girl's armpits so conveniently revealed. The process of withdrawal was repeated on each. Then the head, as several long black silky threads joined the shorter ones in the box. The lid was closed as though upon a treasure. The cedar container was placed reverently upon the altar. Sister Celia resumed her seat "We treasure thee."

The Abbess's voice was vibrant with emotion. For brief moments she gathered the slender nakedness of the captive maid in her arms and clasped it to her own. Her lips were hot and compelled response. Barbe knew herself in the grip of something tumultuous beyond her ken.

When the first lash started again, it was accompanied by a litany. "Thou wil't be obedient."

"I will be obedient."

It was as though another had spoken the response. But it was not enough for punished flesh. "Please, reverend Mother, I beg of you. Don't whip me more."

The lash curled around one hip, licking at her sex.

"Abandon thought of escape, child."

"I cannot escape! I will not escape. Oh please, not again!"

The other hip, the vulva's lip screaming its own protest at the excoriating tip. Barbe tugged wildly at her tied wrists, uncaring of their pain. "You will serve us, child."

"I will serve you. Whip me no more. I'll pledge thee anything."

The thong cut across the buttocks still tender from Cornelia's ash withe. "Thou art purged of the sin of freedom."

"I am purged of freedom."

This time the scald was below an armpit and above a breast. "Thou shal't renounce the world of men."

"I renounce the world of men. Please . . . please don't hit me again. 'Tis more than I can bear."

The other armpit and the other breast flinched beneath the bite. "Thy cunt is ours alone."

It was a word she hated, a word to shun. It violated a decency. Using it now would be like a sacrilege. But the most vicious stripe of all flashed its fire around her waist, extracting from her lips a grievous promise.

"My cunt is thine alone."

The crack of the thong rippled down the nave. "Thy tongue adores the sheath."

Barbe screamed. She could stand no more. It was all monstrous and obscene. She screamed and jerked like a puppet on a string. The supple leather bit at her again and again, finding its lodgement wherever her twisting nudity writhed. At last, gasping and brokenly she surrendered.

"My tongue adores thy sheath."

After many screams the scourging stopped.

CHAPTER SIX

It is never the same afterwards. A girl who has been whipped has crossed a bridge, a bridge that most never behold. She is now apart from her sisters. She has a new wisdom about herself that is startling in what it perceives. Her body has been stripped of more than clothes, illusions are scattered to the winds. After the lash, her world has changed. But, strangely, she has no way to re-enter the rainbow mists from which the weals upon her flesh have driven her. So it was with Barbe. She was kissed but not released. Her moans against the pain of her now bleeding wrists were ignored. She was left to hang and to teeter on her toes and to absorb the enormity of what had been done to her. Her audience dwindled. The Abbess donned her habit

and departed. The whip, warm with Barbe's sweat, languished on the stone. Upon the altar the cedar box reposed in a small majesty all its own.

She judged it just past noon when the two Sisters loosed the ropes. Uncaring, Barbe slumped to the floor, her hands seeking her wounds even before the cruel bands upon her wrists had been removed. The Sisters surveyed her lovingly and granted her the boon of her body's instinctive seekings. It was several minutes before they took her hands and started tugging at the knots.

The kitchen was enraptured with her. She was like a new pet to be loved and cosseted. None, save the chained girl busily employed, could do enough for the whipped maiden who they plied with delicacies. But, gaining strength and confidence from the food and drink, Barbe could not fail to comprehend their interest as being not so much in her as in the scarlet and purple insignias she now wore without pride. To her, they were a badge of shame. To the clucking nuns they were beauty ineffable.

Her bathing was a rite. Sister Celia and Sister Eulalie laved the ridged flesh as though infinitely privileged to touch its tenderness. The rest of her was well scrubbed. She was dried softly and with care. Her armpits and pubic hair were lavishly anointed with perfumes, the dark tresses falling from her scalp were combed and brushed until they shone. When they were satisfied with their work, they tied her hands fast behind her back and took the shackles from her feet.

It was the Chapel once again.

Now they led her to the altar and made her kneel to face one end. There were wooden yokes to fit the hollows behind her knees and over her ankles. When they were clamped down she was held kneeling as a supplicant. A collar was fastened on her throat. Its chain ended in a ring at the Altar's edge. Its links were few. They kept her kneeling erect, her chin not far from the ring itself. She could not slump comfortably back to sit upon her heels. She was held as for a vigil. She wondered miserably how long it might last. She knew it was useless to enquire.

The pews slowly filled. Once more she was examined and remarked upon. Curious fingers traced her whipmarks. When the Abbess entered and made her way to the kneeling girl, all chatter stopped. There fell a silence almost audible. From one eye, the nude sacrifice to lust was able to steal a sideways look at the avid congregation. It was her last. A black band was passed across her eyes and knotted tightly over her hair at the back of her head. The Ceremony, whatever it might be, had begun.

To a bound girl, a blindfold is an agony all its own. It divorces her from all save sound, and sound is a deceptive sense. Barbe's ears strained but could do little more than guess. There was much coming and going and the susurration of clothing in motion. But when the striking of tinder told her of flame and the unmistakable odor of burning hair assailed her nostrils, she blushingly knew the hirsute strands taken from her body had been consumed in some sort of ritual in keeping with the general frightening absurdity of the Abbey. The lid of the cedar box snapped, steps receded. There was a brief chanting of hushed feminine Latin. Then silence.

Appropriately enough it was her nostrils that confirmed what her ears had suspected. The slithering sounds upon the surface of the altar to which she was chained might have been anything. It could have been human feet or human arms against her chest and shoulders, there had been positioning. Barbe had sought to withdraw from whatever was taking place at such close range, but the metal collar around her neck and its sparse linkage held her in close communion. A moment later she knew! The female pungency was unmistakable. A damp vulva had been thrust against her face, its hairs tickling her nose.

In frantic revulsion, she fought. This was different and worse, oh far, far worse than

the compulsions of the Lady Cornelia. This was a ravishment of the spirit as well as of the flesh. The woman's musk enveloped her like a mist of evil. The fastened girl heaved and twisted and strove to back away from that which was presented for her attention. But she was securely held. Her crossed tied wrists were helpless at her back. She could not move her feet or legs at all, the devices in which they were clamped were ingenious and firm. But cruellest of all was the metal on her throat. It held her where her lips were desired to be. She could not withdraw her head from the soft moist thighs that now asserted their authority on each side of her face. She was utterly in their power! Helpless! Able to perform but a single task, a girl whose lips and tongue were pledged. With a moan of despair she went to work.

There was more than one.

In her darkness, Barbe had supposed she was servicing the Abbess. Perhaps she was, she would never know. She had supposed her degradation completed with the act, but it was not. When one appeased pudendum withdrew, another took its place with an avid haste bespeaking its owner's urgency. The chained girl's lips and tongue lapped furiously in a wish to put her hated task behind her. The sooner she had given pleasure to whoever she must, the sooner she might return to whatever kind of normalcy the Abbey was capable of.

But lips and tongues can tire. In the growing knowledge that she was expected to bestow joy on the entire assemblage Barbe's tongue flagged and faltered. It was a hopeless and disgusting task bereft of love. But her pauses were rewarded by the whip. Its burn across her shoulders sent her back to her endeavors with a fresh urgency. Finally she sagged against her collar and begged piteously: "Please give me rest. Please . . I am trying . . ."

They gave her rest.

When it was done she returned to the odorous sexuality of the vulvas of the Abbey. That night Barbe slept upon a bed, a hard affair much closer to a bench. At its foot were stocks. Her feet were spread and placed within the half circles and the bar lowered and locked. She bore no other bonds.

"This is so nice for a girl," said Sister Eulalie.

"But I cannot turn, Sister." Barbe longed for sleep. "Thy whipped back is tender mayhap?"

"Of course it is. Please let me lie upon my breasts."

"This is ordered, dear. It is by way of penance like the scourge."

"But I have done nothing to be penitent about!"

"Hush, dear, our Abbess knows best. All girls need penitence to subdue the heat of their loins." Sister Eulalie beamed and added with bland inconsistency, " 'Tis why thee will find these ankle stocks to thy liking. They separate thy thighs so that thy finger may give thee pleasure."

The still helpless girl supposed it could be worse. It was a hard bed, but all of her was free except the ankles clasped within the wood. Barbe looked longingly at the massive padlock. She could never reach it and could not prevail on it if she could. She examined what she could of herself and counted the purple blemishes on her skin where the lash had curled its tip. Her back remained for conjecture only. She remained sitting, her head cradled in her hands, her legs spread rigidly.

"You have a gift for being lovely, child."

The Abbess's step had been light. Barbe started in surprise, uncertain whether to be glad or sorry for the company.

"I would that I were free, reverend Mother."

"Tush, girl, think how good thy present state would seem should I bind thy hands behind thy back."

It was hopeless! There was no coming to grips with The Abbey. It was an amorphous thing evading stability.

"I wish to please thee, reverend Mother, but I am afraid. Should all days be such as this I'll lack the will."

"The lash will always aid thee, dear."

There it was again! The evasion, the affection that lacked love. "Must I serve in the kitchen as the girl I saw today?"

"Why not, pray! Dos't not wish it?"

"I was not born a kitchen maid."

The Abbess sighed. "How needful to mortify the flesh of girls to stem their pride."

"How long will the Abbey hold me, reverend Mother?" The Abbess beamed reproach. "Why, always dear. Always. How wrong we would be to cast aside so great a gift." Her glance became shrewd. "Or would ye crave deliverance to the Lord Galleas? Methinks his whip would hurt thee worse than mine."

"His Lady was kind to me."

"And am I not?"

How impossible to answer! The captive girl looked at her prisoned feet. Was it cruelty or simply prudence that kept her fastened. "I would live as other girls, reverend Mother. I want my father, and to be wooed, and to run in the sunlight."

"Methinks ye need another scourging, girl."

Barbe cringed. She could not bear the thought of the lash snapping on her flesh so soon again. "I am sorry. I will be obedient and not complain. Please whip me no more . . . not now!" she pleaded humbly. " 'Tis all so strange to me being prisoner."

"I'll think on't, child. You stir my loins. Yet tomorrow mayhap there is a happening."

She said no more but stood pensively gazing at the female prisoner of the stocks. Barbe looked up hopefully, but the Abbess set her vagrant thought aside and substituted another. "Would it pleasure thee to share my bed this night, Barbe?"

The captive no longer deluded herself by naiveté. She knew the implications of the offer, knew also her answer was dictated by the hardness of the bench and her memory of the whip. "Indeed yes, reverend Mother. Oh please, may I?"

"Thy tongue has resilience?"

"Yes! Oh yes."

"Not all thy limbs will be free."

"I care not."

"Ye'll bear a shackle on thy ankle. There'll be no roaming in the night."

"Thank you, reverend Mother. I wish it so." And thus it was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She had expected the whip, chains, one bondage or another, or perhaps the humiliation of the kitchen with fetters on her feet and a dishrag in her hand. The Abbey gave its newest captive none of these. Instead, it gave her back the tunic of Gurnie, washed and pressed and clean. Wearing it seemed almost wrong. She knew nudity became her well, and that the Sisters adored her weals. But Barbe did as she was told.

That there were no bonds must surely be significant of something. She stood as directed, to the side of the blazing logs in the Abbess's study, and awaited that lady's pleasure. She sensed that speech would meet no favour. Thought of using the freedom of her limbs to risk escape was a thing she dared not contemplate.

The arrival of the Lady Cornelia was accompanied by much commotion. Its bowing and fawning and assurances of high esteem deposited her within the room and discreetly withdrew and closed the door.

"Welcome, beloved sister," said the Abbess.

"So it's you who's got her!" Cornelia's uncompromising eye swept up and down her errant slave and came to rest on her own sibling. "I might have known! This infernal Abbey of yours is a menace."

"You are always welcome, Cornelia."

"You'd prefer me as an inmate, I've no doubt."

"Come, the daughters of our father have naught to quarrel over."

"Naught to quarrel over!" Cornelia's voice was high with indignation. She pointed at Barbe. "What d'you call her?"

"A poor waif passing our door . . ."

"Horse turds!" She turned on her former slave girl and demanded, "How did this vulture capture thee?"

Barbe was bereft. That these two magnificent creatures were kin was no surprise. But between them, she was like to collect stripes with an imprudent word. She compromised.

"I was offered sanctuary, M'Lady."

"You see, Cornelia! You and your kidnapping! Look at the child, not a chain on her." Her voice was jubilant.

"Come hither, Barbe." Cornelia's voice was peremptory.

The captive looked from one to the other in distress.

Receiving no signal or denial, she obeyed. Her former Mistress seized her hand. "Oh, ho, no chain ye say!" She pointed to the wealed wrist. "What say ye of this! The girl's been bound tight enough to cut."

"She needs guidance, Cornelia. Stop thy heroics."

With a practiced gesture, Cornelia loosened the belt and whisked the tunic over Barbe's head so that their disputed thrall quailed nakedly. Her scarlet wounds proclaimed themselves like a banner in the breeze.

"Look at her!" Cornelia almost screamed. "You've had a field day with the lass!"

"Purging her of sin, dear sister." The Abbess's voice was mocking.

"And I'll wager ye've made her tongue your flock of cunts?"

"Remember where you are. Curb thy vulgarities." Barbe sensed the Abbess was enjoying her sister's frustrated anger. She longed to flee a battle that offered her no victory.

"I'm taking her back to Gurnie. She is Milord's hostage. He demands her."

"And you, sister, do ye not hunger?" The Abbess's voice was icy.

Cornelia tossed Barbe her tunic. "Put it on, child, we are leaving."

"You'll not reach the main Hall before the good Sisters have thee, Cornelia. Dos't wish to return to Gurnie in tatters and well bruised, and without the girl?"

Barbe thoughtfully slipped into her tunic while the Lady of Gurnie considered her sister's threat.

"You would not dare." Cornelia's voice was uncertain.

"Consider well: The child is in sanctuary. None will violate it, least of all your noble husband."

"Were it not for Holy Church he'd have put thy demesne to the torch long since," Cornelia agreed bitterly. "Thy Abbey is a well of lust. No girl is safe within a mile of it. Gurnie loves thee not."

"But Gurnie is powerless."

"Very well then, what's her price?"

"Thyself."

It was like a thunderclap. In the ensuing silence it seemed even breath was stilled. The two sisters, almost twins, stood like two opposing hosts. Barbe trembled.

"You jest!" Cornelia expelled the words like a deep sigh.

"Nay. 'Tis most practical. Yield thy sweet body to my scourge, and the girl goes to Gurnie."

"Thy scourge would be but the beginning," accused Cornelia bitterly.

"Ye are considering it."

"Aye, I'd take a thrashing to dispose the matter. Milord is wroth," Cornelia

admitted slowly. "But once ye had me bound with my consent there'd be no end. Those clucking hens of thine would be fluttering their cunts in my face forever."

"Is that so bad?"

"For me it is. I could say I was shriven by thy scourge. But there's no excuse for t'other. And there'd be no keeping it a secret. I'd be the butt of a hundred jokes and the laughing stock of three counties."

"Me only." The voice of the Abbess was level and firm. The two women stood poised, assessing each other's will. Barbe saw them as of equal strength with circumstance alone giving the Abbess her advantage.

"You must shame me?"

"Of course, sister mine. 'Tis the spice in the cake." The voice of the Abbess was the satisfied purr of a cat.

"And can I trust thee?"

The Abbess nodded thoughtfully. "You can. But I cannot prove that you can. You know no ill of my word, thee must take me on trust."

It was another long silence. Then the Lady Cornelia turned to the wide-eyed and unbelieving girl. "We return to Gurnie together, love," she said with firm decision. "But thy price is far from cheap."

It happened as though ordained and planned. Each player knew her part. Barbe crossed her wrists behind her back and stood meekly as Cornelia bound them tight.

Once more she had changed owners. She stood, then, while the Mistress of Gurnie stripped, handing each garment to her sister for safe keeping. When she was bare of all covering she turned her back and offered her hands, her head proudly erect as they were tied with spiteful competence. None doubted the Abbess would extract the full measure of her hard bargain. Cornelia marched to her scourging without a word. She spared glances of contempt for Sister Celia and Sister Eulalie as each grasped one of her bound arms and guided her to the pagan chapel and the place where she must stand, as Barbe had stood the day before. They bound her slender ankles to keep her impotent while they completed their task of suspending her from her wrists. When they were done with her, Cornelia turned to her watching sister and demanded petulantly, "Why cannot I be whipped with my feet upon the floor! What profit it for me to teeter on my toes like a child's toy?"

"You are as I desire thee, sister." Cornelia said no more, but she took an alert notice of all about her, as though storing it for future reference. Her interest finally centered on the woman into whose hands she had delivered her body and upon the whip that would excoriate her skin. "You'll use judgement in the use of that thing, I hope?" she demanded arrogantly of her sister.

The Abbess smiled. "And should I not?"

It was a wicked question. It drew a quick glance of comprehension from the woman bound. "Give me no cause to seek vengeance," she warned. "I'm no lost waif–"

Her sentence and her breasts were cut at the same moment. The arc of the lash was as a flash of light. It impacted across the upper slopes of both ivory mounds. As it fell away, the watching girl breathlessly beheld the birth and ripening of its scarlet path. Cornelia yelped in startled pain and indignation. The familiar gentle applause came from the pews. "Damn thee, Charissa, 'tis no fair manner–"

Again the whine and the snap of leather across breasts.

It was an admonition, an assertion of power. Charissa, the Abbess, smiled in a great happiness, her eyes glowing at sight of her bound sister's writhing nudity. Barbe tugged at her tied wrists and made herself as unobtrusive as she could. She felt an inadequate prize in this battle between Amazons.

"You rotten bitch!" Cornelia's voice bespoke betrayal, her realization of an error likely to cost her dear. "Scourge me properly as is meet."

"What deem ye proper for a stripped whore, beloved?" The Abbess's voice was silk.

"My back and rump, damn you! And I'm no whore. What's a bit of dalliance–"

Barbe winced as the thong bit across one of Cornelia's nipples in its traverse of her twin charms. The victim herself twisted and heaved in an infinite distress, her free legs kicking at an invisible enemy.

"For the love of Heaven–!" Her eyes were wide and pleading. "Stop it, stop it! For pity's sake, not my breasts! Thy stinking lash will slice off my nipples."

"There's time enow' for thy back and thy seat, sweet Sister," Charissa assured equably. "But thy teats may yield a humility they will not. Mayhap humility may become thee."

"I'll have thy tits on a platter for this! You evil–"

The scourge bounced the noble breasts once more. Cornelia screamed. It was a frightening blend of fury, frustration and pain. Her sister, Charissa, smiled beatifically.

"Enough! I've been a fool. What must I do?"

"Scream, beloved. Ye do it passing well."

"Be serious, you vixen. Name thy price for saving my tits harmless."

The Abbess pretended to consider. Then, most casually, she shed her coif and habit as she had done when whipping Barbe. She stretched her lithe beauty for her sister's delectation. The whip in her hand was the only embellishment of its loveliness.

"Must I admire thee stripped?" Cornelia demanded pettishly.

" 'Tis a better freedom in which to scourge thee."

"Ye need it not. Please, not my breasts."

"If not those rosebud teats, then mayhap ye'd deign to raise a leg?"

"In the name of Satan why would I do that?"

"Ye speak often of cunts, beloved. I oft' think it thy favourite word."

Barbe saw Cornelia's eyes distend, her figure tense. Her heart went out to the nakedness which had delivered itself into so ill judged a servitude to buy her.

"Ye would not dare?" The voice betrayed awe.

Charissa laughed delightedly at her tethered sister's fear. "And why not, pray!" she

declared lightly. "A snapping scourge across thy cunt will swell those hungry cuntlips for thy darling's tongue."

"Respect some decency . . . before the girl. In sight of–" The seeking leather caught the lovely spheres from below and sent them jouncing upward. Their owner went into a paroxysm of anguished motion. The applause from the nave came as a benediction. Barbe quailed, twisting at her cords. The Abbess sighed in joy. The Lady Cornelia of Gurnie raised one leg.

She raised it high.

The lash struck upward between the straining thighs. The slicing intimacy of the cut within her sex kept Cornelia actively engaged with moans and cries and flailing legs for almost a minute. When she raised a tear streaked face to her watching sister she could manage only a plaintive query.

"An' did that pleasure thee?"

"T'was a most joyous act, dear heart."

"There is more?"

"Thy other sweet leg. 'Tis only fair."

Cornelia bestowed a flash of bitter loathing on her sibling and did as she was bidden, to be rewarded instantly with an accurate cut which transported her back to her land of anguish, her peals of outrage and the rhythmic plunging of her leg.

The bartered slave who had been Barbe of Camelford watched, fascinated, as the two vital and lovely creatures fought with their pride and their flesh. That one was bound helpless did in no way impede her anger or her tongue. She would fight the bitter humiliations awaiting her with all her courage, yielding only slowly to the torment her ill judged confidence had delivered her into. Barbe had ceased to fight her cords. She was firmly bound, and that was that. Her feet being free left her sorely tempted to walk boldly from the Chapel. But to essay it before a score of watching eyes was but to invite abuse. She leaned helplessly against the wall and gave her attention to the feminine duel between female flesh and female whip.

"Charissa! You loved it once. Not there again - not there!"

"But your cunt adores attention, beloved."

"You are mocking me. It was not our bargain."

"If not the lash, let me fill thy lovesome slit with nettles."

"No! Charissa, this shames us both before so many!"

"The leaves of the nettles could remain with thee, and go with thee from our gate."

"Charissa, ye are being beastly. I agreed to be scourged, not tortured."

"A few nettle leaves–?"

Cornelia bestowed a doubting look upon the sister who held her in thrall. "An' if ye use the nettles, what then?"

"We simply use them, darling."

"Without remission of aught else. Surely for such a misery ye could forgive me something."

"Ye presume to bargain. Come sister, consider your condition."

"My condition is shameful. Charissa, show some mercy!"

The abbess made a brief motion. Sister Celia rose and left the Chapel. Cornelia's eyes followed her in bitter knowledge. "Is there nothing ye would not degrade me with?" she asked wearily. "Would I treat thee thus were our roles reversed?"

"Much worse, I imagine."

"I pray the time will come."

"Perhaps it may, sweet sister. May the thought hearten thee."

"My scourging has scarce begun. Already I'd be on my knees, an' I could get there."

"Let me show mercy then. I keep the child, I cut thy cords?"

The Lady Cornelia shifted unhappily against her tortured wrists. "She's not mine to barter. T'was Milord who paid the gold." Her nostrils flared in pride. "I made a bargain, I'll keep it and I can."

"Many grievous stripes await thee."

"I'm sure there are. But have the decency to place them where they belong."

"Aye, I'll be merciful because I love thee." Her voice mocked. "But I think ye'll find thy darling back and proud backside more tender than ye believe."

Lady Cornelia sniffed disdainfully. She was painfully aware of a rash and hasty decision. There was little love between herself and her sister, but she had supposed there was enough to ensure her an honest scourging and no more. A dismal abyss of painful possibilities now lay open to her view. Charissa was in a puckish mood.

"Would it not serve thy purpose just as well to put me in thy prison and thy chains for a week instead of cutting me to pieces with that filthy whip? I ask it as a boon."

Cornelia was close to tears.

"And have that oaf Galleas pounding at my door!"

"A message could divert him. He'd relish seven days without me. Besides, it's his time for the hunt."

Charissa was intrigued. The thought of this proud beauty languishing in an Abbey dungeon at her pleasure was entrancing. Her imagination flitted happily among visions of the chains and confinements with which her sister's stay could be made dismal. She smiled in delight.

"Bravo! 'Tis an inspiration. I'd not thought of it."

"You accept?" Cornelia's heart leaped.

"Of course, why not! I'll scourge thee well, then place thee in the darkest hole I have. I adore thee for the wish."

"No!"

Cornelia's cry of outrage rang down the nave. She strained in an exquisite picture of beauty in distress against the cruel ropes by which she was held upon tip-toe.

"It would be treachery . . . a broken pledge." She looked wildly about her for absent aid. "Milord; he will indeed hammer on thy door."

Charissa smiled benignly. "But you have already said: a simple message which I can write. Ye honour our House with a visit of seven days. I'm sure he'll be glad to be rid of thee."

In silence, the sisters exchanged messages with their eyes. While their gaze locked and held, Sister Celia returned.

She carried a sheaf of nettles.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Barbe knew an inconsistent guilt. The Lady Cornelia had been reasonably kind, the abbess had not. She was now a helpless witness to Cornelia's humiliation, and presumably to a bizarre agony. Barbe had never even in the experimental play of childhood, placed a fresh nettle leaf within the orifice of her sex. She shrank cringingly from the thought. For the woman who was striving to gain her release from the Abbey it would not be a single leaf. Sister Celia had gathered enough for a dozen palpitating vulvas. In innocence she wondered how many leaves Milady's unwilling slit might accommodate.

In a girlish impulse, compelling but doomed, Barbe strode in front of the bound nudity of the loveliness about to be despoiled. Her wrists were twisting in their bindings, her eyes were wide in a desolate appeal as they scanned the spectrum of the watching nuns. Her voice held all the innocent conviction of the young.

"Please don't be cruel. Please be kind to her. She has harmed thee not. She is of noble blood and innocent . . . ."

There were titters. The distraught girl turned and fell to her knees before the Abbess's vibrant nudity. "Please, reverend Mother! Please! Milady seeks but to aid me. I beg thy mercy for her."

Charissa glowed. The scene appealed to all her senses.

Her lips seethed with lechery. She smiled from the bound woman, down whose flanks the sweat of pain and fear trickled in precious drops, back down to the supplicating girl who knelt so sweetly in her plea.

"But, dearest child, we deal in simple innocence. There is no Rack, no faggots 'round a stake. A few small leaves and a little time in chains. Come now, is that so cruel?"

"You whip her so terribly, reverend Mother. Please, I am not worth so great a price."

"And I never bargained to pay it, child," Cornelia added angrily.

"Such sympathy! Such affection!" The Abbess bestowed the benediction of her smile on both her captives. "You feel, child, her nobility denies those nettles within her cunt?"

"Yes, reverend Mother. 'Tis too terrible a thing to do to one of us. Forgive me . . . please spare her."

" 'Tis a lusty bunch dear Sister Celia has plucked. So, yes, I will spare the Lady Cornelia some of them. They shall be placed within thine own sweet cunt instead."

"You bitch, you utter bitch!"

Cornelia flung her nakedness against the ropes, one wrist was bleeding, sweat streaked her curves. By an effort of will, she stilled her contortions and glared at the Abbess's blandly smiling face. "Not the girl," she panted. "Be sensible. We all value her. Cans't find no love for her in what she seeks to do? 'Tis out of pity for me. And, damn you, she gives you respect enow."

The angry words had impact. Charissa nodded soberly and looked down at the kneeling girl with tenderness. "Thy lady of Gurney speaks some truth, Barbe. So is they darling cunt saved free. But there is a task I'll require. The nettles may not enter thee, but thou shalt' make sure they enter well Milady's swollen lips."

The indefatigable pair, the sisters Celia and Eulalie, guided the quaking girl and forced her to her knees to face the suspended woman's thatch of pubic hair and her legs straining at the floor. They bound Barbe's ankles tight together and loosed her hands. Beside her they gently laid the sheaf of stinging leaves. It was like a votive offering.

"I won't do it."

Barbe's declaration appeared to surprise no one. The ceremony went forward as though rehearsed. Whilst the kneeling girl was still testing her new helplessness, the scourge whistled above her head and bedded deep in Milady's breasts.

"I scourge my sister's breasts 'till ye obey."

"No! Stop!"

Barbe uttered the demand without knowing where it would lead. Piteously, she looked up at the woman she had been ordered to torment. Lady Cornelia was gasping and shuddering under the fresh blow, but looking down into the hurt eyes, she tried to smile and said in panting urgency.

"Do it, child. We have no choice."

"I cannot, M'Lady."

"You can. You must! Look to my breasts."

Barbe looked and shuddered. If it was she herself who hung there her choice might be the same. She looked down at the nettles in doubt.

"I will hold it not against thee, dear girl!"

"Stuff her full - and no stalks!" said the Abbess pleasantly.

"Thy thumb and finger must suffer, dear," the Abbess advised helpfully. "But is not that better than a full quim?"

Barbe knew it was.

The busy nuns had produced two small blocks of wood. They placed one to each side

of Milady's striving feet and guided the reaching toes to stand thereon. It was a clever refinement. The suspended beauty could find easement for her cut wrists at the expense of her dignity. Her legs were now far apart to expose her wealed sex in obscene invitation. Sensing Barbe's reaction she said decisively, "It eases thy task, child. I'll strive not to fight thy fingers. Get on with the job. The sooner those cursed leaves are within me the sooner we'll be done."

"How admirable a precept," the Abbess cooed. "Come, Barbe, hesitate no more. Our beloved sister pleads for the warming of her cunt."

With one hand Barbe plucked a leaf ignoring its venom. With the other she separated the wealed and swollen lips between Milady's thighs. Trembling she tucked the vicious scrap of green deep inside the clutch of the moist membranes.

Cornelia did her best, but her scarlet face proclaimed her shame, her gasping flinch told of agony. "Do as she tells thee, Barbe girl," she whispered brokenly. Then she closed her eyes and thrust a cheek against a tethered arm. Before Barbe's anguished eyes the muscles of abdomen and thigh convulsed in rejection of the scalding intrusion. She looked sideways at the rapt and smiling features of the woman with the whip, but all she got was a smile and a nod of command. Desolately she plucked another leaf. When her thumb and forefinger once more separated the soft labia, it was as though an old friend had opened a reluctant mouth. The leaf slipped easily inside, telling her by its entry that the punished orifice might hold many, many more.

Milady moaned steadily.

How cruel it was that the lovely back be scourged! How cruel it was that the original bargain was now beginning. The blocks were gone from beneath the straining toes, but Milady strove to separate her thighs to ease the scorching burn within her sex, save by total suspension it was a thing she could not do. She moaned her frustration. She was bathed in sweat. When the first blow of the leather marked her back it was with a sound of wetness. She arched her naked figure in agonized response. After the seventh cut she screamed steadily.

Then Barbe stood and watched. Her feet were free, but now her hands were tied again at her back. She scarce noticed their loss, so intent was her absorption in Milady's punishment. The burning torment of her finger and her thumb told her of what Cornelia must be suffering. The twenty or so leaves within her clenched sex would be busily exuding their own bizarre punishment as the thong bit into the helpless back and jouncing buttocks.

For Charissa it was a day of days.

That night, her ankle firmly chained to the bed of the Abbess, her tongue fatigued by its ministrations to the naked beauty's insatiable need, Barbe lay beside Charissa in her own nudity and found the temerity to plead.

"My heart is sad for her, reverend Mother."

"Thy heart is tender, child. It pleases me. Shed no tears for sister mine. She is an arrogant bitch. A few nights on the stone with irons for company will do her naught but good."

Barbe nestled against the scented flesh in which she found a strange comfort. "She may be in pain, reverend Mother. Has she . . . have they . . ."

The Abbess chuckled. "Weep not for the nettles, Barbe. When we cut her down at eve we gave her a space of time for whatever she must do. If she did not get them all out of herself 'tis her own fault."

"You mean that now she cannot . . ."

"Aye. Our beauty is well ironed so that her fingers will not reach her slit. T'would be a poor penance an' she could play with herself."

"Why do you hate her, reverend Mother?"

"Tsk, child, I love the foolish one. Our paths diverged and she has become overweening in her pride."

It was in Barbe's mind to tell the woman at her side of her own similar fault, but she hushed her tongue. Punishment was everywhere in the Abbey. Instead she asked, "When I am sent from here, will it be as Milady's prisoner? Will I be bound?"

"How else!"

How else indeed! Barbe sighed sadly and snuggled deep within the soft moist thighs as though in need of warmth.

"You may do it to me again," said Charissa. Barbe did it again.

The chain locked on her ankle weighed a ton.

It was in keeping with Charissa's sense of humour that Barbe was ironed to the opposite wall. When she and Cornelia strove to embrace, the chains attaching them to the stone sprang taut and snubbed them back a yard short of union.

Barbe wept. She had shed tears when she first beheld Cornelia's nude loveliness huddled on the stone with metal bands on wrist and ankle and neck. The Lady of Gurnie seemed clothed in metal, the iron links falling from her everywhere. She had looked up, first in hope and then in dolor, as the younger girl had been escorted into the dungeon gloom, chained to the opposite wall and left to share her prison. Barbe's tears were not for both of them.

"Thy tears are sweet lass. I've shed some bitter ones now and then, throughout the night."

Barbe sniffed and brushed at her wet cheeks with fettered hands. "They have used thee cruelly, M'Lady."

"I did not bargain for a hundredweight of iron," Milady admitted ruefully. "But I should have guessed. Charissa will enjoy me to the full now she has me."

With a wry grin, the Lady of Gurnie contrived to stand. It took an effort. Barbe saw now the metal belt locked tight upon the still slender waist. From it a chain went to the wall, others to each wrist. From the wrist shackles chains went down to those upon her ankles. Seeing the mass of metal no one could doubt its punitive intent, any single one of the fetters would have held her secure. The total effect of all was misery for the woman on whose nudity they were locked.

"She is so cruel to thee."

Milady shrugged and said bitterly, "T'would please Milord of Gurnie to see me thus."

Barbe's wrists and ankles were chained. It was from the links joining her hands that the chain tethered her to the wall. She tried uselessly by every contortion to reach the companion who stood impotent at the limit of her own restraints. "At least I can keep thee company, madam."

"By being prisoned in this dank hole, love. 'Tis not fair to thee."

Barbe flushed. "I fear 'tis but for the days, M'Lady."

"How sad thy fate, child." Milady once more arranged herself and her chains upon the floor. "When 'tis not her it will be me."

"I do not mind, madam . . . But . . . but, will I never be free?"

Cornelia looked at the bare whiteness of the fettered girl, still standing uncertainly. She was not given to pity, but felt a trace of it now. "An' ye could, you'd flee us all?"

Barbe squirmed. Whatever she said to these two women would always be part wrong. She kicked fretfully at a chain. "Yes, I would flee."

Milady chuckled sardonically, "I cannot fault thee. I'd run myself, but I doubt ye'll ever be free of bonds. You're precious. Even men adore thy sweetness."

That night the Abbess gave Barbe love. She did it with superlative skill. As the chained girl lay prostrate and the rainbow faded and the stars returned to place, she wondered if it was as a bribe.

Sister Celia and Sister Eulalie clucked like hens. They bound Barbe with much love and cruel skill for her journey back to Gurnie. Her laundered tunic permitted their full attention to her bare arms. "Mustn't have thee escaping, must we love?" They tittered as at some huge joke.

The seventh day was done. The captive girl stood passive without hope to be tied for safe delivery to Castle Gurnie. She flinched as the cords bit at her wrists. How familiar it had become to have her hands placed palm to palm behind her back and to feel the circling strictures. And how frightening that her elbows must be bound too. It negated escape and spelt pain, but she meekly stood for that too as the solicitous pair tugged and compressed until her forearms were squashed tight together and held thus by many bands. She was soundly bussed and verbally assured of deep affection. The Abbey was absurd and inconsistent to the end.

The Lady Cornelia was not notably subdued, there was a difference. The seven days and what had preceded it had touched her. Barbe could not be sure whether the affectionate farewell between her once again Mistress and the Abbess and her nuns was motivated by sincerity or only an anxious desire to safely depart. Barbe herself was glad to go. She had suffered a closer bondage and harsher punishments in The Abbey than elsewhere since becoming hostage. Yet that awaiting her at Gurnie was daunting. Once more male hands would touch her and male eyes strip away her tunic. She knew that when the Abbey Gate clanged shut its knell spelt change.

"Who loosened thee, lass? I must know."

It was the third time Galleas had asked the question, and the third time Barbe had failed to answer. She stood, her arms still laced painfully at her back, and faced him in the big chamber with its fireplace and its evidences of Milady's presence. The Lady Cornelia herself sat, ill at ease, before the blaze and eyed the two of them in vexation.

"Best tell him, Barbe, he'll have it out of thee."

Defeat once more claimed the captive girl. Somewhere she had a friend, an unknown who might spell her only acquaintance with freedom. The minstrel and his song, her scarf and keys. If she told the truth no one would believe her. She tried a lie.

"I do not know, M'Lord, the dungeon was dark." Galleas waved her words away

impatiently. Turning to his wife he demanded, "Call thy hand-wench." When Gwenneth came he ordered brusquely, "Strip me this maid."

Gwenneth took her tunic and left her bare. Naked she stood. His eyes burned her arrogant breasts.

"Know thee why thou art' stripped?"

"Yes, M'Lord."

"Why then?"

"That I be hurt - to make me tell what I know not."

"Leave her be, man! Cornelia's submissions were strictly limited, her temper flared. Her Lord had not seen her whip striped body, she was safe enough. "The girl probably tells the truth. T'was like to be some many who seeks of her the same advantage as yourself. Between ye you've made her merchandise."

"If I've a traitor in the Castle I'd know his name."

"The girl doesn't know. With an ounce of gumption you'd see."

"She knows summat!"

Barbe was bereft. Awkwardly, because of her bound arms, she sank to her knees before the booted male. She bowed her head. "Please Lord, send me not to be tortured. I can tell ye naught."

"Yet ye escaped?"

She shifted uncomfortably, knowing herself lost. "Yes Lord."

"Well then?"

The Lord of Gurnie had small patience for feminine whims. When the kneeling girl remained silent he turned to Gwenneth. "Take the girl and hang her by her thumbs until she finds her senses. If she gives ye trouble summon help. Whip her as ye need."

Only silence followed his edict. Impatiently, Galleas took his wife by the arm. "Come! Ye can visit the little bitch anon. Ye and me have things to do." He led her away.

"This hurts me much," said Gwenneth.

The two girls, one naked and bound, the other free, followed their Lord and Lady from the room.

The naked Barbe swung gently when she moved.

She tried hard not to move, to do so hurt the more. Her toes were a good six inches above the floor. Looking up the columns of her strained arms she could behold the leather bands Gwenneth had tightened below the knuckles of her thumbs. Each band was at the end of the bar from which she was suspended. Her hands were well apart. They could not touch. Her free fingers splayed out ineffectually in contrast to the taut and tortured thumbs. They could aid her not at all. She sobbed broken-heartedly in lonely pain.

Its seeming normalcy had made it doubly awful. In the room designed for such things, Gwenneth had asked her simply, "Shall I summon help, dear? Or can thee

bear to aid me in what I must do to thee?"

Helpless, yet needful of human touch, the bound girl had rubbed her cheek against the hair of the girl who would loosen the cords that still cut her arms. It was a sensuous, cat-like instinct to which Gwenneth instantly responded. They held close and kissed.

"I will aid thee, dear Gwenneth. Thou art a friend. I want not to lose thee. Summon no one, but tell me what I must do."

They had shared another hug when the bound arms had been freed and the deep weals cooed over and massaged. This time the two freed hands had been doubly ardent. It was good to use them again.

The torture to which Barbe had been sentenced was a simple one. The only aid Gwenneth demanded was to hold the innocent hands meekly to the fore and allow the soft leather nooses to be positioned and drawn snug upon the small female things. It was Gwenneth who shed tears when the startled toes had left the stone and sought a lodgement now denied. Barbe's panting gusts of agony were hard to bear. The dutiful slave girl kissed her charge and fled.

Barbe hung naked.

The two bound thumbs sent their pain to every part of her. Their agony was greater than they could bear alone, they passed it on for all her flesh to share. Barbe moaned in the nadir of her helplessness. Her lovely youth was stretched and wracked and denied ease. She might hang thus for days and not die. A nude girl, her thumbs held by a noose, her toes flailing only air. It was so simple.

It was diabolical.

She could not count time. It passed, but computed only pain. Pain was all! It was her life. It filled her world. She could not see beyond it, for it might go on forever. Her thumbs throbbed, her shoulders screamed mutely. It was many aeons of pain before Cornelia spoke.

"I could not save thee, love."

"I know, I know," Barbe moaned and tried to smile.

"I dare not ease thee now. He's about the place somewhere."

"I am being tortured. So be it! 'Tis no fault of thine, M'Lady."

"To hang thus . . . . tis very awful so I'm told?"

"Yes, M'Lady. How long?"

"Unit! you tell, I suppose - if he's merciful! He may be wroth and leave thee hang."

"I've naught to tell."

"The fool will ne'er believe that. Men . . . bah!"

"Please make him chain me safe, M'Lady, and sell me quickly."

"He does nothing speedily save hunt. An' he'd go to the forest I could free thee."

"Would he most truly go hunting and leave me thus!" Barbe was aghast.

Cornelia laughed bitterly. "Of course! Thou art' but a girl. Milord has little use for us. When he pierces me he wastes but little time. He forgot a slave girl once and let her hang as thou art' now for two days and two nights–"

"She lived?"

"Aye, she lived. A woman's flesh is stronger than a man's. We are all designed to suffer. 'Tis what we do best."

"Aye."

A silence had lengthened. Cornelia had kissed her fondly and departed. Alone in agony, Barbe had closed her eyes and tried to find a dream.

Milord had been less sympathetic.

"Have thy thumbs more sense than thy head, girl?" he asked gruffly.

"Mercy, Lord. Free me, I beg of you?"

"Ye've scarce had time to test the stress, lass. By tomorrow you'll talk enow', 'Tis a poor way to spend the night."

Barbe moaned. "I cannot bear it. I shall faint . . . or die!" He chuckled coarsely. "Faint ye may, an' we can douse thee with cold water, but die ye'll not. Take no comfort in such a notion."

"Please, sire, punish me in other ways."

"Don't talk to me of whips, girl. I often think a girl enjoys a good tanning of her rump. I see our good Abbess has striped thee well. I'll wager thy cunt was wet at the finish o' it?"

"Then other ways, M'Lord. I know so little . . ."

"Most other ways are worse, child. Count thyself lucky."

"Sell me, Lord. I am no profit to thee like this."

"Aye, ye have a point. But only stubbornness keeps thy toes off the floor. I'd have a dozen men enter thee to loose thy tongue were it not for the price of that seal within thy slit."

He walked around her hanging nakedness. She sensed his desire. He plucked at a frond of her pubic hair and laughed at her startled cry. "Ye think me cruel, lass, but consider well. I could have thee lashed every hour, and a hot iron pressed to thy flesh after - and still leave thee hang. Gain some sense ere' I see thee next."

He went away secure in his male freedom and left behind a naked girl who wept for his insensibility.

Sometime in the afternoon Barbe lost consciousness and went into the darkness where there is no pain.

When she drifted back into life she feared to move, feared to resume her pain. But there was no pain, only an uneasiness and lack of comfort. Startled, she sat erect.

She was in a dungeon. It was even less savory than the one from which the keys had granted her escape. She was chained, and the irons were heavier and their links

short. Galleas had her and was going to keep her. But his heart must have softened. She had been prisoned and fastened thus while unconscious. Could other than he have ordered it! She did not know. All she knew was that she was captive and that her thumbs and her shoulders still protested their treatment of the day. She judged the afternoon advanced. The barred grating was but small, the light already dim. She had naught to look forward to save sleep, and sleep on cold stone holds little ease. Dolefully she peered about for the bits of sack or a bundle of straw within the compass of her chains. There was none.

CHAPTER NINE:

It was dark beneath the trees, a fearful place for a girl alone. Barbe was grateful for the tunic and the scarf. They gave a scanty shelter from the night air and hid the nakedness that might betray her in the dark. Whoever had placed the scarf within her reach in the dungeon had placed the tunic too. The scarf had held the keys as once before. Her young legs flashed in a pure joy of motion and escape. To be free of all bonds was bounteous miracle. Her eyes had become accustomed to the dark so that it impeded her little. She ran as fast as she dared along the path that took her steadily deeper into the forest of Avangel.

It came very faintly at first to her disbelieving ears, but was not a sound to halt her flight. When it became more distinct her spirits soared to keep pace with her feet. It was the sound of a lute.

He was darkly cloaked so as to become a part of the tree against which he lolled. He did not sing, but the melody of his lute robbed his figure of menace in the gloom. When the fleeing girl came within his sight the music stopped. Barbe stood, panting, uncertain of either fear of joy.

"My name is Mark."

The name and his use of it was honest and invited trust. His voice was rich. It held a hint of amusement.

"I am called Barbe, of Camelford."

"That I know, else I'd not be here. Will ye trust me?"

Barbe was in a mood to place her faith in anyone who had not placed bonds upon her person in the past weeks. In a great yearning for normalcy she said simply, "Of course I will."

The horses had been as well concealed as their owner. When the man named Mark lifted her to the back of one of them Barbe wondered if he could hear the beating of her heart. She was young and she was female. She had little enough chance to assess her rescuer, but his voice, his stature, and his assurance were comfortingly and breathtakingly masculine. She glowed with feminine happiness.

"We'll need to pace a few leagues before I'll feel safe from Gurnie," Mark said thoughtfully as he looped his instrument over his back.

She would tell him naught of her torture or her chains. Her blood raced. "To the moon an' ye wish it," she said gaily. "I want no more of dungeons."

As Barbe's horse followed its leader at an easy lope, it occurred to the fugitive that she knew nothing of this man except his name. When after two hours of hard riding he made their modest camp, she fell asleep in the saddle and knew naught save that his arms were strong and that he bundled her warmly in his cloak. That he shared its

warmth she neither knew nor cared.

He was all she might have wished. In morning light they examined each other with a sudden shyness. His evident pleasure in her sent her pulse racing once again. Without hesitation she asked the question uppermost in her mind, "Why? How did you . . ."

Mark enjoyed her mystification, then added to it. " 'Tis a long story."

"Tell me."

"There is no time. I have mission. It is to get Barbe of Camelford to safety. Ye belong not in prisons."

"I shall burst with curiosity."

"T'will be the better tale for the keeping."

"My father?"

"He is well. I take thee to him, two days of steady riding."

"You're no minstrel?"

He laughed in frank enjoyment of her curiosity. "And why not? H'ast heard better?"

He refused to play for her, but became intent on needful food and water. The horses packs revealed a provident planning for this ride. It was not until after another day in the saddle that he relaxed enough to play his lute to her across their small camp fire as darkness settled on Avangel. Barbe listened entranced. A dungeon and now this! Her spirits effervesced.

For Barbe it was a dual freedom. Her bonds were gone, but also she was alone at night in the forest with a man, a man such as to stir a girl's pulse. It was liberty such as she had never known. Her previous life at Camelford could never have countenanced it. It was when she went to the small spring and used its waters to wash that she remembered her near nakedness. The Gurnie tunic hid the essentials only when she stood erect. Any motion was likely to reveal parts of her not normally presented to view. She found she did not care. Her enemies had seen her nude, why not a friend. Amusedly, and with a delicious wickedness, she became aware of Mark's interested regard. Coquettishly she arranged herself so that her long, bare legs invited attention. The more sexual protuberances of her anatomy were only sparsely covered by her sheath.

"You are very beautiful."

Others had said the same. This time she thrilled to his sincerity.

"It has brought me naught but trouble," she admitted wryly.

"They were cruel to you?"

She extended wrists and ankles for his inspection. He nodded as though confirming prior knowledge. "They kept you always bound?"

"Or chained, always."

"Your thumbs, you were tortured?"

"They said I should be grateful they did no worse than hang me by my thumbs."

"Galleas?"

"Aye, Galleas."

She told him of her travails. In a sudden elfin impulse she turned her back and shed her tunic so that he could behold the marks of the Abbey's whip. "The front of me is without wounds," she said demurely.

She heard his indrawn breath and felt his tension across the fire. She knew herself wanton, a prey to the heady intoxication of liberty. She wished she could know if he was affected most by her wealed skin or by her bare back. But Camelford was still strong within her conscience so that she hastily slipped Cornelia's tiny garment back upon her beauty. Gaily she posed him a question.

"Why are girls whipped?"

He teased her back. "Perhaps they deserve it."

"Did I?"

"I would fain think not. But then, I was not there."

"She flashed him a glance of mock reproach. "An' I were wed to thee, woulds't thou whip me for being woman?"

He pretended to give the outrageous question full attention. "I doubt t'would be needful more than once a week."

"Before the servants or in the privacy of our apartment?"

A small demon of mischief was prompting her. Barbe had travelled far along a road to emancipation. She was testing discarded inhibitions. A heat between her legs warned her of unseemly thoughts, but she rejected the cautions of other days. In a delicious trembling she basked in Mark's whimsical regard.

"I would have a room for thee, entirely thine. We would repair to it when your impudence stepped beyond propriety."

She was suddenly serious. "You would too, wouldn't you!"

They both laughed as at a discovery.

"Will thee bind me through the night to keep me safe?"

"I may bind thee to keep myself from harm" he admonished with seriousness.

She could not be sure of him. She was femininely glad. She deemed it wise to keep her teasing within bounds. "Play for me," she pleaded in a capricious change of mood. "Play to me of love . . . sweetly."

Mark's eyes never left her as his fingers plucked magic from the strings.

On the previous night her need of sleep had banished the shyness inherent in their isolated proximity, a woman and a man - a boy and a girl! The notes of the lute still quivered in the air as Mark spread the heavy cloak and gazed up at her quizzically.

"We slept back to back last an' ye knew it not."

The pink stealing down her cheeks was not a reflection of the flame. She felt herself

adrift, a ship lured ever onward by horizons it had learned not to fear. An adventurous ship - seeking . . . . Events of the past days had changed her. She wondered if indeed it was change or only a release of female instinct latent and in wait for circumstance. Bulaire and Gurnie had imposed urgencies, an awareness of tumultuous life sweeping her forward to fates designed by others than herself. With the chains and the cords cast aside, the former captive glowed with the intoxication of liberty whose depths held more than she had once dreamed. She rode on the crest of her discovery.

"Mark."

He looked up, startled by a vibrancy in her voice.

"I am still virgin."

He said no word, his face impassive. Her courage held. "My hymen has been bought and sold and mocked." He was patient, waiting for what he sensed she must say.

"It has seemed to me a silly thing of small account. Blood has been shed and I have been given much pain."

His eyes glowed, but he remained immobile on the sward.

"I was so innocent when they took me. But each day I learned. They taught me things I had not dreamed could be. Between the cruelties there has always been the reference to my maidenhead, as though it was a thing to justify the death of men."

They gazed at each other across the fire in a mixture of sobriety and excitement.

"At Camelford I had thought little of virginity. It was something there which one day would be gone. But when I was taken. When I was striped and whipped and bound, and given to women, I discovered that whilst they spoke oft' of . . . of that between my legs, it was as invisible to them as to me. When I was forced to look at M'Lady Cornelia naked and tied as I had been there was no difference. Her virginity was long since lost but, naked, we are both the same."

Mark knew she was striving toward discovery. Speaking not so much to him as to herself. He had the wisdom to say nothing.

"To be called virgin . . . 'Tis like the relics the good Father keeps in the sacristy. They are of metal or wood . . . that is all. They are only what we make them become by giving them names."

Her voice drifted into silence as she mused poignantly upon all that had been done to her, and the motives of their doing.

"Being virgin has got me naught but pain . . ."

It was as though her fingers belonged to someone else. Barbe's eyes beheld a vision as her hands loosened the belt and drew Gurnie's tunic over her head. She tossed it aside and fluffed her hair in the most female gesture in the world. Naked, she clasped her hands behind her neck, thrust out her breasts, and stood erect facing the man across the fire.

"Look at me," she demanded. "Can'st call me virgin by what ye see?"

The flames flickered their light and shadows upon her loveliness. The secret beneath her pubic hair was secret still.

Mark adored, enraptured.

Barbe disposed her nudity upon his cloak.

The sun of morn brought no shyness to them, only one more fierce and ardent journey into ecstasy. There had been enough of couplings through the night, but they floated on a sea of youth and potency that bid fair to last their lives. Barbe was in a golden mist of happiness. Her tunic lay where she had put it the night before. Her nakedness felt no chill of morning air as she went to the spring and provoked her skin with water chill enough to daunt one not armoured by the glow of love.

"Thou art a wicked wench."

Mark's voice was complacent, he too was enchanted.

"Woulds't have me otherwise!"

Their glances flickering back and forth across the fire were more eloquent than their lips as they broke their fast. A hundred questions had been urgent in Barbe's mind but went forgotten in this new wonder. She beheld Mark as her Lord indeed, marvelling in the magnificence of his strength and masculinity. The heavy sword and sheathed dagger he wore upon his belt were in strange contrast to the lute, yet he carried both with an easy assurance that made them right. They dallied much and long. The morning was well advanced when they broke camp and took up their journey.

It was an hour later that the men of Gorlois took them.

CHAPTER TEN

The troupe of twenty men-at-arms under the grim leadership of Brunet had scoured Avangel time and again since the ambush of which Galleas had claimed his own. They swooped upon their prey with exultant cries. Two of them, evidently briefed and pledged, seized Barbe instantly while the remainder fell upon her solitary company. The battle was short.

Mark slew Brunet with his first blow. The honest soldier of Gorlois fell almost at Barbe's feet as she struggled vainly against strong rough hands. She could almost believe his grave eyes smiled at her before they closed in death. In anguish she saw two more men fall beneath Mark's blade before his horse and its rider crashed into the forest and disappeared. Beside one of the dead. Mark's lute lay smashed and splintered. A worried sergeant took charge.

"The man's a devil! Three dead and him unscathed."

"I've seen him before, Eldol. Somewheres, but I can't put a name to him."

"The lute's a ploy. He's no minstrel."

Eldol's first concern was with his prisoner. "Tie the girl well, she's a slippery vixen," he ordered irascibly. Catching her eye he changed tone. "I'm sorry, lady, but we'll take no chances with ye this time."

"There's no need to tie me this brutally."

"Mayhap you're right, maam. But we'll be in Gorlois by night. 'Tis no great time to spend bound."

Barbe's world was in ruins. So great was her anguish she almost welcomed the cut of

the rope as a fitting accompaniment to her despair. Nothing mattered any more. She was taken. She was captive. She was bound. The ugly hopeless cycle was beginning all over again. There would be chains and stripping and whips and dungeons. Cant and insincerities would flow like water, lecherous eyes would seek her breasts and pubes! so great was her desolation, she could not weep. One single strength alone remained to her: Mark was alive and unhurt. He could not defeat a troop, but he was out there somewhere in the forest. If he had found her twice he might again.

She stood like a broken bundle while they bound her. It was the now familiar wrist and elbow. But this time harsh strands circled her arms and waist. A noose was placed upon her neck, its final length held by he who led her horse. "Ye must be sorely feared of me," she said bitterly.

They paid no heed to her complaint. Eldol and his men were uneasy. They feared the forest. Having taken her, they wanted only the safety of Gorlois. They made chastened retreat along a new road at a sharp canter.

Barbe rode with them without hope.

"I have to hope the profit on thee justifies the loss, girl."

The Lord of Gorlois examined his captive without either pleasure or animosity. She was a chattel and he had many. He was a man square of jaw and of shoulder, a man of war turned merchant. Standing bound before him, Barbe knew herself accurately assessed. He was probably a man without charity, not to be crossed. She had been deposited in his presence and left bound and bedraggled from the ride. The noose still trailed from her neck.

"Ye intend to sell me, M'Lord?"

"Oh, aye, What else!" a glimmer of humour flickered in his regard. "Thou are' a lovesome piece, no doubt. But I can't fuck all I've got now, without another."

Barbe flinched from the ugly word and realized its implications. Such a word had no place in what had passed in Avangel between herself and Mark, it savoured of rape.

"Would ye not sell to my father, Lord?"

"As ransom?" Gorlois shrugged regretfully. "Thy sire lacks the gold I'll get for thee. Nor has he advantage or favour." He mused thoughtfully. "Sit ye down, girl and tell me of Gurnie."

"Milord, I am harshly bound."

Gorlois seemed surprised. She could not tell if he had but just heeded her bonds or if it was the temerity of her hint. Absently he took the bands from her waist and cut away the cruelty on her elbows. Her wrists and neck remained captive.

"Thank you, sire."

He laughed shortly. "Eldol made sure of thee." Gratefully she sat and told her tale. She answered his questions as best she could. She owed fealty and love to none but Mark. For the rest, she could speak freely.

He accepted her accounting as though it was figures for a tally. At the end he bestowed a reluctant smile of condolence. " 'Tis a sad tale for a maid to tell," he conceded gravely. "But it's one I've heard before. An' ye were staying here I'd tell ye you'd be better used. But, with luck, I'll have to hold thee no more 'n a week or two."

The captive knew herself greatly daring. "M'Lord," she ventured, "I would ask a

boon of thee. If I am to be held captive, might it be other than chained in a dungeon?" I have had overmuch of such dark miseries?"

"And little trouble getting out of them," he suggested caustically. "If ye elude me as ye did Galleas I'll call myself fool."

"I am only a girl, M'Lord. I cannot break chains or beat down doors. I am easily kept prisoner as I was at Bulaire."

He chuckled, amused by her concern. "Surely ye don't expect the freedom of my demesne with naught but a set of fetters clattering on thy feet!"

She squirmed, embarrassed. "They would hold me safe, Lord."

He was diverted by her naiveté. "I'd not sleep o'nights with thee flitting with so little hinderance. Think more on't."

"An' ye wish it, my hands could be ironed too. I'd be helpless enow' then?"

" 'Pon my soul, ye tempt me, lass. Ye've a way wi' ye. I'll agree, a dungeon's a poor dwelling for thy quality."

"Thank you, Lord." She looked at him hopefully.

He frowned at an afterthought. "Be there blemishes on thy person beneath that rag?"

"There are many whipmarks, Lord."

"Nay, I speak of defects?"

"None"

"Ye're a proud hussy, are ye not! I can see how ye collect thy stripes, Strip so I can see for myself."

"I am still bound, sire."

"Damn! I'd forgotten. Another time will suffice. But if I'm selling goods I want to know their worth."

"Ye can loose my belt and lift my tunic, Lord, Ye'll see enough of me. It will save parading me naked."

He slapped his thigh. "By all the saints you've gall enough for a dozen. But ye've got sense with it."

The Lord Gorlois loosened the belt and lifted the tunic.

His captive stood for him, thrusting back her bound hands to implement his scrutiny. What did one more man matter! She'd been ogled by enough of them. His fingers were almost tender as he tidied her back to decency.

"You're a beauty, girl," he sighed wistfully. "An' I were twenty years younger I'd take thee to Camelford and collect thy dowry."

"Ye do me honour."

His quick glance was keen as a blade. He had detected the faint sarcasm. For a moment Barbe quailed, fearing his wrath. But he grinned and waved away the tension. " 'Tis as well I'm selling ye. An' I keep thee beside my chair thee'd cozen me,

twist me round thy finger. Thou has't a witchery."

His impersonal normalcy gave her heart. "How must I be held captive, Lord?"

His face became stern. "In the deepest dungeon beneath this keep and with irons enow' to damp thy impudence."

He saw the desolation erase the animation from her face, detected her poignant tug at her bound wrists, and laughed at his own dry humour.

"Forgive me, girl. Ye tempt a man to tease. I do not jest about thy impudence, but I'll not let it wilt down in the dark. I am puzzled as to what to do with such as thee."

"I feel a trust in thee, sire. An' thee could return it I'd give thee my parole, my word I'd not leave Gorlois without thy sanction."

"And join me in my bed o'nights, I suppose." She flushed.

"No! No.!"

Gorlois was intrigued with her. He waved a weary hand. "I'd take thy word an' I'd take anyone's," he admitted slowly. "But there's much at stake and too many interested in thy pretty person."

"So throw me in a dungeon then!" she retorted angrily. "I'll not plead more." She gulped unhappily and offered a weak amendment. "But I'd give thee gratitude if you'll not have me chained as well." She gave him a forlorn smile. "Or mayhap but little."

He responded to her courage. She was direct and blunt in a manner he found pleasing. She was a hostage, not an enemy. He was inclined to gentleness.

"One night only," he declared slowly, "and but a single chain on thee. By morning I'll think of something?"

It was a small victory. A dungeon is a fearsome place when it is forever. But for a single night! With luck she might sleep through most of it, she was tired enough.

"Thank you sire."

It was the same two soldiers who became her jailers.

They led her down the lantern lit steps, chilling in their foretaste of things to come. If the dungeon had a window it was too recessed and far too dark to know. They clamped a chain on her right wrist. It attached her to the wall by a six foot span of links. They left her the lantern.

The captive girl stood in forlorn loneliness in the sad dark place. The door had thudded and the bolts shot home with the usual fearsome finality. She fingered the shackle on her wrist. It was tight and solid; she was held. But the noose was gone from her neck and the cords from her limbs. Whimsically she held the lantern to search the dark corners of her prison, but there was no scarf. She reclined upon the stone and wondered how long it would take her body to warm it enough for her to sleep.

She slept.

It had been a name nagging at her memory: 'Tower Room'. Brunet or his man had spoken it in seeming jest. When the steps and the hands upon her arms had taken her up and up, her spirits had risen too. Where there was daylight there was hope.

It was comparative luxury! A prison sure enough with its iron studded door, its implacable stone and its latticework of bars across the large bright windows. But a prison planned to please and not to punish. Its furnishings were rich and scattered with a feminine touch.

There was also a girl.

She stood, quite obviously surprised to have a visitor and at the manner of that visitor's entry. Barbe had been propelled through the portal by a guiding hand on her back, and the door slammed and bolted behind her. She stood in equal astonishment.

The girl was naked. Her ankles were shackled but the span of chain between was long enough to impede no motion save escape. She was clean and boasted a ribbon in her well brushed hair. She was well groomed to the point of being sleek, save for one anomaly. Sometime within the past week she had been whipped.

"My name is Francene,"she said amiably, "What's he got you in here for?"

It was a little like The Abbey in its incongruous unexpectedness. As Barbe told her story she felt odd and out of place. Francene's approach to captivity was a faintly sardonic cynicism.

"You have to be naked, love: didn't anyone tell you?"

"No one told me anything. I've just been dragged out of a dungeon."

"You look like it. Come on, stand in that little tub and I'll wash you down."

It was a little like being a domestic pet but Barbe was grateful for the water and the scented soap for the hands that laved her nudity. She then sat and had her hair brushed like a princess.

"You'd better not put that funny little dress back on," Francene advised. "We're not allowed to cover anything except our cunts. I've got a couple of rags for that. We may as well tie 'em on. I don't bother, but with two of us it will save us looking at each other's hair all the time."

They were very pretty rags. Barbe tied hers around her hips with satisfaction. "Why mustn't we wear clothes?" she asked innocently.

"Prisoners don't, love, don't you know that by now?"

"But this isn't like a prison!"

"Try and escape! You'll see."

Barbe looked about her. At the appointments that deceived. A naked girl could never leave the stone chamber unless someone released her. The place was little like a dungeon, but would hold her just as safe.

"They'll chain your feet too," Francene volunteered cheerfully. "Just like mine. Don't let the long chain fool you - it's so you can be fucked. But you can't do a thing without tripping. It's easy in here, you get used to it. But outside, if you walk or run you go flat on your face."

Barbe was intrigued by the chatter and startled by the four letter word. "They actually let us out sometimes?"

"They have to, silly! That's when we get whipped and fucked and all the rest."

"Couldn't they do that to us in here?"

"They do sometimes. A girl never knows. But it's nice to get out of here, even if it hurts. 'Specially if you've been in here as long as I have."

Barbe recalled the soldier's jest. Was Francene one of the discarded lemans of Gorlois! She longed to ask, but supposed she'd find out soon enough.

"But why are you whipped?"

"For fun! His, of course, or one of his friends." Francene look at her companion in surprise. "Don't you know? Gorlois has six of them. Six lovely lemans he never uses any more. One for each day of the week except Sunday. He whips one of us every day. We each have our own particular day, mine's Tuesday."

"But why doesn't he use you, and why the whip?"

"He had a sickness." Francene's face clouded. "It was sad. It left him without the power to . . . to mate with us. So now he uses the whip instead. Men love to whip girls. Whether they're potent or not they find a join in it. I sometimes think it's a greater and more lasting joy than in piercing our loins."

Once Barbe could not have understood, now she could, now she could. "But if Gorlois is impotent, then how . . ."

Francene laughed gaily. "His friends. He lends us to them as hospitality, or to gain a favour. I'm not certain he does not accept gold for a night with us." She giggled, "He likely puts a price on each stroke of the whip. It's them who fuck us."

The stone and the bars were suddenly doubly grim. Francene's cynicism was understandable. She had nothing to look forward to beyond the strange captivity she had described. Barbe wondered if she herself could remain as cheerful in such an imprisonment. Francene was but four or five years older than she. To have spent those years behind these bars and with that chain trailing from her ankles! Barbe shuddered.

"He says he's going to sell me. Why doesn't he sell you?"

The older girl grimaced. "We lemans are not of noble blood. You offer Gorlois profit beyond your cunt. Such as I and the others can be easily stolen or purchased. An' I were sold, t'would be but to other walls and other bars. I'm better off here."

"You are not of common stuff. Thy speech?" Francene's laugh was rueful.

"Gorlois got me young and taught me well. There were tutors and he himself. I got whipped for errors so I learned fast. I though he would marry me." She fell silent for a nostalgic moment. "I loved him. He was so grand, so powerful. I felt so wanted and so loved. There were no chains."

"The manner of your coming to Gorlois?"

"My father tilled the soil. The gold of Gorlois meant so much to them. I came here gladly, proudly." Her features softened. "Gorlois was kind to me. In his way he still is. He has given me so many gifts." She kicked the chain on her feet and grinned. "This was but one of them. Can you understand how he can be kind and still do such?"

"I think so."

"I still love him." Francene shrugged deprecatingly.

"Perhaps because there's none other. A girl must love someone."

"But the other five! Why are ye kept separate?"

"Oh, Barbe!" Francene giggled. "Thou art not that naive. Put six lonely captive girls together in a prisonment!"

"Would that be so terrible. It robs him not."

"Ye know naught of men, love. Though they scorn a girl's cunt they'll make certain naught else enters it save her own finger."

"But to keep ye alone!"

"I said Gorlois is kind. He is: the six of us were once quartered together. But there is a rule. Any of us caught giving or receiving a tongue were to be whipped." Francene giggled. "At the end of a month we were all so wealed and marked and sore we were glad to be prisoned apart."

"You mean, if you and I . . ."

"Aye. If we're caught at it, we'll both be flogged."

Francene raised a comic eyebrow. "But I'll risk it an' thou art' willing?"

They took the risk.

"I needed that! Thou art' gorgeous."

"And thee, so sweetly tender."

Barbe had been surprised at the depth of her own passionate need. Holding Francene's hot and writhing nudity had been a revelation of feminine dependence, the need to touch and be touched with love. She wiped her pouting lips with her loincloth and then tied it above one hip with reluctance. Nakedness had become convenient.

"If we'd been caught . . . how . . ."

"Oh, there's a room," Francene explained airily. "We're hung up by our wrists, stark naked, and all the girls and half the servants come to watch us dance and hear us scream. When 'tis done we're left to hang and reflect on our sins."

"Who is it that–"

"Wields the whip!" Francene grinned. "Sometimes 'tis Gorlois himself. And there's a woman who tends us, she oft' does the job. Maybe a soldier who's won himself a gift. There's no rule. They all hurt."

"This woman."

"Wenna! She's a bitch. She toes Gorlois's line, but hers is the heaviest hand." Francene giggled. "He warned us when he brought her here. Her job was to make us behave."

"But it seems that–"

Barbe's sentence was cut short by the slam of bolts and click of latch. The door

opened to reveal a grinning man, a grinning boy and a stern visaged woman.

It was easy to recognize Wenna. She carried authority with an easy insolence. Her thin lips slanted in a hint of humour at the startled, and possibly guilty, looks of her two charges. She wore a belt. From it hung a loop of cord and a short whip, its thong falling limply beside her thigh. Her first act reeked of suspicion. With firm assurance she palmed each girl's sex, then eyed her moist hand accusingly. But she said nothing. There were other matters afoot.

Barbe knew instantly. One look at the shackles and the tools in the smith's hands, and at the helper staggering under the weight of the small anvil, was enough. Needing only a wide eyed grin of invitation, she sat herself upon the floor and extended her bare leg. She watched in passive resignation as her ankle was positioned within its metal band, the other half of the circle fitted to clasp her tight, and the two rivets inserted in their waiting holes.

"Ye've done this 'afore, lass." said the smith approvingly. Ignoring his work he leaned forward and flipped back her loincloth to reveal that which it was intended to hide. Then roared with laughter at her instinctive and angry flipping of it back into place.

"Let him see thy cunt, girl. A man deserves a bit o' encouragement in his work." Wenna's voice was that of a mother coping with a large and unruly family.

Barbe did not answer. She knew defeat when she saw it. She had also noted the hand that moved toward the whip. Disgustedly she loosened the knot and cast aside her small and lonely protection. Then, in provocative wantonness, she moved her one free leg aside to allow her pubic hair to stare back at the wide-eyed scrutiny of both males. The resultant pause in operations was such as to demand Wenna's impatient, "Get on wi' job, man!" to prompt resumption.

"T'was thee, Wenna, what told t'lass to bare her quiff." the smith pointed out reasonably. "A good look won't do it no harm."

"It won't get them irons on her either," Wenna retorted firmly. "I'd think ye'd see enough o'cunts in thy work to keep thy prick within bounds."

"Aye, woman. But not such a noble one as we've got here."

"They're all the same!" Wenna snorted contemptuously. "It's in a man's mind."

"I'd put it in a man's pocket, an' I could. This here's beauty. Look at that thatch!" said the smith approvingly.

His helper snickered and handed him the hammer.

Barbe wondered how many times she would be compelled to sit and behold herself ironed. It was a strange sensation to know that each thudding blow of the hammer robbed her of a mite of freedom. While the process of joining her ankles was still in progress, Wenna asked.

"Ye understand obedience, child?"

"Yes, I will obey you."

"You know summat' o' the whip, I see?"

"I have been well whipped. I do not like it."

Wenna laughed. "Ye know, then, there's them as do?"

"What's going to happen to her, Wenna?" Francene asked.

"That's for me to know and thee to find out, nosey one," Wenna rejoined amiably. "Mayhap I'll give her a few thrashings to keep her in good humility."

"Will M'Lord Gorlois whip her?"

"How should I know, girl! He will an' he wants to."

"I'd charge her now't fer' to gi' her a good lacing," offered the smith generously.

"You men!" Wenna conveyed infinite disgust. "I suppose you'd whip me too on same terms!"

"Aye, I would that! I'd slice that rump o'thine so's ye'd know a bit o' respect fer' a man."

"Pshaw! Hammer thy rivets and begone."

The men departed, chuckling. Under the eyes of the two women, Barbe got to her feet and examined her new confinement. She took a few tentative steps this way and that, the weight of the chain heavy and swirling as she moved. Dolefully, she realized it would make little difference to her within this room whether her feet were chained or not. "They're quite beautiful," she admitted in reluctant admiration of the polished and finely finished metal she must wear.

"Aye, thy Lord takes good care o' thee." Wenna's voice was caustic. "Spoils the lot o' yee I'd have 'ee sweat a bit had I my way." She looked from one to the other of the young faces surveying her with cautious respect. She pointed at Barbe. "You! This way. Come along o' me." She made for the door.

"Oh, Wenna, you're not going to whip her already!" Francene's indignation was spontaneous.

"I'll whip thee, young lady, an' it please me." Wenna threatened without malice. "There's no law says we have to wait 'till Tuesday."

Barbe found it strange to be beyond a dungeon door and herself behold the shooting of the bolts and the turning of the key. The massive finality of the act evoked a picture of the lonely captive within and the totality of helplessness for any naked girl so confined. It made the chains upon her ankles seem superfluous. Yet, now beyond the door, she supposed they imposed their own utility. Certainly she would not run!

"There's a thing t'will do thee good to see." Wenna told her gruffly. Come, follow."

As Barbe took her first real steps in her new shackles she found herself blushing self-consciously at the outrageous clatter of the long span of links upon the stone. Francene was right. The seeming freedom of the long chain was deceptive. It lay in wait for unwary toes and swirled itself where bare-feet were like to tread. She walked her captive as fast as she was able, but Wenna was obliged to slow her pace. "T'will cure thee o' foolish notions o'escape," she admonished. "And remember, them rivets don't have a key. Ye'll get rid o' them irons 'bout as easy as ye'd get rid o' the feet they're on."

The nature of the room was not hard to guess. The accoutrements on view bespoke their use. When Barbe was backed against the stone and a collar snapped upon her neck she found she could stand or walk a single pace each way, that was all. When she was left to stand alone she began to glimpse a purpose.

The clatter of the chain was pathetically easy to recognize. It might have been her own. But the nude girl who followed Wenna into the room had mastered a skill beyond her own: the newcomer did not trip. She looked at Barbe with bright eyed interest. She was most visibly not frightened.

"Greetings," she offered cheerfully. "Your name's Barbe, I know. Mine's Kirsten."

"A saucy Saxon wench," Wenna motioned to the heavy blonde hair.

"Wenna's going to whip me, and you're going to watch. I'm so pleased."

Barbe wondered if she'd heard aright. The grim statement scarce matched the careless freedom of Kirsten's bearing.

"It's my day, y'know. M'Lord's absent on his affairs, so Wenna's going to whip me for him."

Barbe's features must have betrayed her puzzlement. Laughingly, the fair-haired girl explained.

"You're thinking 'tis odd I do not scream, and kick, and plead. T'would profit me not, and would irk Wenna so I'd gather cuffs and extra stripes." She turned to their female jailer. "How long has't been giving me my weekly whipping, Wenna?"

" 'Bout four years, I make it. Fine old fuss ye used to make fer' the first o' 'em."

"See, I'm her favourite prisoner."

"Ye're a bundle o'impudence, that's what 'ee be," Wenna said maternally. "M'Lord Gorlois striped thee but little seven days a'gone. I'll make ye squeal today, so I will."

"She's most passing kind to us all," Kristen volunteered with dubious sincerity. "Just be nice to her. I say, Wenna love, can we use the same rope as last week? It doesn't cut my wrists in two the way that other does?"

"Oh aye, I suppose so. Spoiled rotten, the lot o' ye." Barbe watched, startled. Was Kirsten possible! Was her happy acceptance of penalty and pain a pose! Or a joke! Was it possible for a girl so long a captive to so adjust to her condition! Was it! Would she become as insouciant about being whipped as this lovesome creature now busily employed in untangling the rope with which she was to be bound! Perhaps after all the Abbess and her absurd Abbey were not the only seeming lunatics extant.

"There, it's all ready. Wrists together, Wenna, or apart on the bar?"

"Put 'em together, girl, 'tis easier."

"I look prettier when they're apart."

"That ye may do. But ye kick more prettily t'other way. Let's have 'em."

Kirsten held out her hands to be bound. Having delivered them to Wenna's mercy she ignored them and turned a smiling face to the girl chained to the wall.

"I expect I seem very silly?"

"I don't think I could manage to be so cheerful."

"Hold your praise, love. I'll be screaming as lustily as Wenna desires once I feel

her stripes."

"I'll make sure o' that," Wenna said without menace as she looped and tugged.

"But there's no use me starting too soon, is there love! Ye do see what I mean, don't ye. I'd be on my knees soon enow if it 'ud get me off a few."

Barbe assured her of sympathy, and spoke not of her doubtful understanding. She watched with an almost practiced eye as Wenna threw the rope over the beam and hauled her compliant victim up until she hung, pendulum like, with her toes an inch or two above the stone. Kirsten no longer looked exactly cheerful but there was no grimace of pain. She gave the watching girl a small reassuring grin as though to tell her this was all as it should be.

Barbe wondered if she, too, had looks so beautiful in the wrist suspension. The punished loveliness had taken to itself an exquisite symmetry as though its tractioning had rid it of the shell of everyday and clothed it in a mystical nakedness of its own. The strained arms proclaimed and flaunted their armpit hair and closely framed the feminine features that would soon begin to scream. The rich golden tresses were brought forward by Wenna's practical fingers and allowed to drape a single breast.

It was like seeing herself. She, too must have appeared thus. There was a terrible recognition of taut muscles and seeking toes, and of the close held hands so useless above the biting bands of rope from which depended this entity of pain. Barbe thrust her hands against the cold stone at her back, her own helpless captivity forgotten in the spectacle of this lovely leman's weekly martyrdom.

"How's this for a start, Miss Impudence," asked Wenna as her arm drew back.

A naked girl was hung in helplessness and whipped. It was part of that girl's life in the Castle of Gorlois. The act was without drama. Kirsten had been whipped before, she would be whipped again. As she wielded the lash, Wenna's mind was occupied with her household tasks still waiting after Kirsten's nudity had been well striped. Barbe, watching it happen, recognized her now familiar feeling of unreality.

Wenna's thong impacted its own particular sound as it indented itself into Kirsten's skin and painted its crimson path. Barbe winced each time in a vicarious sharing of shock. Kirsten herself followed what was for her an old familiar path. A gasping inhalation at the first stroke's flash of fire across her back, then moans and small cries which were not so much in protest as they were an attestation acknowledging the mastery of the whip and her absorption of its agony. It was not until the eighth striation of her flesh that she started to scream. She screamed exquisitely. Wenna smiled in acceptance of this tribute to her skill.

"I made too much noise, love." Kirsten gasped apologetically after a long, long time.

Wenna had gone. The whipped girl still hung helplessly, her skin glistening with the sweat of pain, one wrist showing a spot of blood as evidence of the writhing kicking convolutions of its owner's nudity under Wenna's lash. The time of diminishing moans and futile thrustings of naked legs and feet was past. The golden head had ceased to turn and lunge against the stretched bare arms and upon the wracked shoulders. Kirsten was demonstrating a remarkable resilience. She managed a wry grin and explained ruefully. "But it hurts so. I never can quite get used to it."

"You're wonderful." Barbe's tribute was sincere. "She whipped you cruelly. I'd lack thy courage."

"T'was worse today. Wenna taught thee a lesson on my back."

"Oh, Kirsten!"

"Grieve not. T'was no fault of thine. I've had worse." Barbe clutched despondently at the metal collar locked upon her neck. She longed to go to the aid of her whipped companion. She surveyed the scarlet striped body unhappily.

"But why? Why must thou . . ."

"Why must I stay like this, love? 'Tis the custom. Wenna says it gives time to think on my transgressions."

"But that's cruel! Thou dos't not deserve it."

"Like enough I don't." The punished girl's features became reflective. "But 'tis passing strange. I tell thee this with shame. In the next days I will begin to look forward to this time next week. 'Tis most lonesome locked within my prison."

Barbe quaked Kirsten's confession held a poignant truth.

In the end of all human emotion lay eternal loneliness. The need of familiar flesh, a hunger for the beloved's voice. Seeking both, a girl would willingly accept the lash. Was this her life to be!

"Francene spoke of men - the guests of Gorlois?"

Kirsten laughed. "Ye would hear of them! They are but men. They whip us and pierce us with those big hard things between their legs they're so proud of. Some we hate, and some we love a little. They break our loneliness."

"But they all hurt you?"

"Aye, they hurt us. Methinks a few are cruel because they think they must. They wish to be proud of their whip as they are of their silly cock. 'Tis a male conceit." She snickered. "I scream loudly to please them."

"Why should'st bother to please?"

The twist of Kirsten's was eloquent. "If I please them not, M'Lord Gorlois will visit me. After he has done to me what it pleases him to do, I will then try very hard and promise to be very good."

Barbe sighed. It was a life without hope. A circle of impotence around a core of pain. In the end its dressings of luxury hid nothing of the intents and hungers of the male. "But have none of them pity, nor a wish to help a maid whose flesh has pleasured them?"

"Perhaps. But none will cross Gorlois, even the kind. M'Lord Gorlois is feared. He has power." Kirsten's face shadowed in retrospect. "When I was first so used I found a maiden's shame in what was done to me. Not the whip, nor in the piercing of my slit, but in their fumblings. When men had whipped me to their liking, and then fucked me, perhaps more than once an' they were young, they would bind me as they wished and look at my breasts, or at the bush between my legs, or at my bottom and those things that lie betwixt its cheeks. They would handle them and stroke them and stick their silly finger into me. The whip had taught me to pretend I was pleased, and to answer their foolish questions."

"Questions?"

"Oh aye, why not!" Kirsten giggled again. "They were so curious about our bodies. Men have seen their own, but little enow' of ours. They ask if my breasts

bounce when I run. Or did my nipples get more and more excited as the cloth of their covering rubbed. They wanted to know if having my bottom whipped made me long to be fucked. Or did I stick my finger in, when my hands were free, and do it myself."

"But men with wives?"

"I thought that too, but 'tis not so. The priest and their mother teach the bride to hide herself, opening her legs only in duty to to be pierced. He may use all of her in the dark of their bed, but his view will not be good So having me, they used my breasts and my cunt and the rest of me as they would have used their wife an' she be not denied."

Barbe envisioned herself pawed and pierced. Men were children! Women were dolls! Tied with her feet spread wide! She banished the easy vision. "And this lasts long, this looking?"

"It excites them. Then they fuck me again and start anew. Men are bedevilled by cunts." Kirsten chuckled viciously. "An' a girl desire revenge for what men do to her she has it there. The fools must think of our cunts constantly. They look at our faces and see only a quiff. When they get the chance they clasp our cunt in their hand and squeeze and knead as though they scarce believe their luck. I've had louts gawp at mine as though they'd not believed it there. They love to speak on't. Think love, to talk of naught but thy cunt for an hour!"

Barbe thought of it and felt despair. But Kirsten's suspended nudity was of greater import. "Cannot I scream or cry aloud so that Wenna might come and perchance release thee, thou has't hung there long enow'?"

"And get us both soundly whipped!" Kirsten's voice held reproof. "Come, Barbe love, thou art' wiser than that. I did it once and will not again. She whipped my breasts."

"But you seem so happy? Oh Kirsten!"

"And why not love! A leman with a long face pleasures no one, least of all herself."

Barbe beheld her future in Kirsten's nakedness. It was bereft of joy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

Barbe suspected the dais on which she stood to be no more than a box conveniently placed in the centre of M'Lord Gorlois's private sanctum. It had been covered with a rug to give effect. On it her nudity was advantageously displayed. It had required the full stretch of her ankle chain to enable her to step upon its eminence.

"And stick they tits out, girl," had been her owner's admonition when she was left to await whatever humiliation was now pending When Gorlois returned he was accompanied by a shrewd-eyed man of middle age. Barbe assessed him as of a lesser fiefdom, though his assurance spoke of gold. One of William the Norman's men, rewarded by a stretch of conquered soil. He looked at her with frank approval.

Remembering his instruction, and wishing to please the man who held her future in his hand, Barbe tautened her nudity and clasped her hands behind her neck. She knew all too well how the raising of female arms enhanced female charms. She had nothing to lose.

"Ye'll find none lovelier," Gorlois said curtly.

"Aye, ye could be right." The visitor circled the dais slowly. "Would the maid flee without that iron on her feet:"

"Mayhap. Ye can have the iron along wi' the wench an' ye wish."

"I'd keep her safe enow'. What troubles me is Milord of Camelford a'knocking at the door."

"He's neither men enow' nor gold. If he'd had the coins I'd send her to him for a price. She's a sweet lass. I wish her naught but good."

"aye, I doubt not she is. But then there's that hunting oaf of Gurnie. Story has it he paid his gold then let her slip through his fingers. He'll be an angry man, spoiling for a fight."

"Oh aye, his temper's frayed," Gorlois chuckled. "But he'll not attack me or thee. Henry Beaoclerc wants no blood letting between his Normans. There's few enough of us against the Saxons as it is. Harold may have died at Senlac, but the rest o' them's watching and biding their time."

The prospective purchaser continued his inspection.

Barbe kept her eyes on a horizon above his head. He was not such that she would welcome his chains. He seemed to value her only as a female body of pleasing proportions. He would be no stepping stone to better things. She stood in her fettered nudity, hating her plight.

"Chantylon bites not the bait, 'eh?"

The Lord of Gorlois betrayed his irritation with his visitor's caution. "I've made him no offer. He's leagues away. He'll have enow' female flesh I' Henry's Court."

"But he's young and lusty and needs a wife. This lass would suit him well. She'd please the King."

"Take her and peddle her at The Court then. I've not the time."

The man of caution laughed. "Hostage we may call her in Avangel. But I'd make a pretty picture leading a Norman wench in chains to Winchester seeking bids."

They bickered. Much of what they said was meaningless to the naked girl on the dais. But she took heart that she was Norman. It was small enough advantage, but it gave her a value a Saxon girl would lack. Kirsten, beautiful as she was, would provoke no debate such as was taking place before her now. They walked away finally, still arguing, leaving her as though forgotten. Barbe allowed her hands to fall to her sides. She stood pathetically, not daring to step down from her eminence. After awhile Wenna came and returned her to the Tower. She had not been sold.

"Cheer up," advised Francene with cheerful cynicism.

"Mayhap thy next may be young and handsome and with a long, hard cock. An' such a one should come, ye'd best show him you're willing."

"And how do I do that! Standing there like heifer in a stall?"

"Thy eyes, thy tits. Come Barbe, thou knowest as well as I."

"Francene, what will happen to me be I not sold?"

The older girl gave the thought the consideration it deserved. "Gorlois will ne'er waste thee," she mused slowly. "Ye'll likely be as I am. Whipped every week and sent to please his guests. 'Tis known he gets value from the six of us: favours, concessions, and gold too like as not. Ye're no leman, but stripped who'll argue the toss!"

Barbe sat and idly kicked at the shackles joining her ankles. She had become used to them. They pinpointed her condition - neither harsh nor easy. A benign captivity, but one without hope of escape. She could no more rid herself of their iron clasp than she could leave the comfortable prison room she shared with a girl as helpless as herself. Their eyes met in a communion of resignation. They smiled in a pleasure with each other. But there was nothing to say.

The summons came on the fourth day. Wenna used the cord at her belt. First Barbe's wrists, then her elbows. When she moved fretfully against the circling bands on her arms Wenna chuckled and told her grimly:

"There's worse things, girl, than a bit o'rope in thy skin. 'Tis time ye were whipped to keep thee grateful."

"But you don't need to bind my elbows. I'm helpless enough. Please, Wenna, 'tis an unkind hurt."

" 'Tis a hurt to keep thee in thy place. Come"

For Barbe it was a sad journey. Totally robbed of hands and arms, she must be doubly alert against the tripping chain. Wenna good naturedly took a handful of her dark hair to give her guidance and a rough stability. She thought back to those other times when she had been tied thus. None of them presaged good. A girl with tied elbows finds optimism elusive

"Where are you taking me, Wenna?"

"A place you'll no be expecting, love." Wenna's voice was sardonic. "T'will be a welcome change no doubt."

"Have I been sold?"

"Ye'd like that, wouldn't thee, lass! Some fine young hunk o' a man to pierce thee every hour."

"That's all anyone talks to me about." Barbe was irritated. "Either I'm to be pierced or whipped - or both. Is there naught else for a girl in Gorlois?"

"What else d 'you want, lass! A man can do both to ye and love ye too."

" 'Tis never a man who whips me, always a woman."

"And tongues thy cunt as well, I've no doubt. I've had my suspicions 'bout ye and Francene." Wenna sighed regretfully. "I'd have liked well to liven up thy sweet innocence with a whip."

Barbe did not fail to note the past tense, but asked impudently, "I've expected ye to. What held thy hand?"

"Your Norman blood, most like. An' ye'd been a Saxon wench I'd have laced thee well."

"Because I was Saxon?"

"Nay, because ye're a female and young."

"Why would flogging me give you pleasure, Wenna?"

"A young girl's screams are piteous and sweet. Ye'll find it's the older of us who stripe thy skin. 'Tis our revenge for what we've lost."

"You'd whip me because you're not as young as I?"

"Aye, a girl's tears tighten up old loins and build a fire in all."

Barbe cared little for the conversation but preferred it to a portentous silence with only the clash of her chains to mark their passing. "Does it liven thee to whip a man or boy:"

"Nay, 'tis not the same. An' I flog thee, thy cries will be alike to when a hard prick rams deep into thy sheath."

Heartbrokenly, Barbe thrust the memory of Mark away. He was gone, and with him her virginity. She deemed it best that none should know. She asked innocently. "I've been told that being pierced by a lusty male gives us women much joy?"

Wenna sighed. " 'Tis akin to pain, child. Perhaps ye had the best on't with Francene. She'd no give thee a squalling babe."

On a sudden impulse, Barbe plunged into dangerous ground. "Wenna, thou has't power in this place. See to it I escape back to my home and thou woulds't be well rewarded?"

"I'd be well rewarded with a flogging and a dungeon, girl," Wenna retorted grimly.

"Nay, come with me. Ye'd be honoured at Camelford."

"Tush, child, use thy brain. Only the smith can free thy feet. Ye'll go nowhere with those irons rattling with each step. 'Tis Milord's wisdom in making thee wear 'em."

The captive girl sighed. It was hopeless. For a chained and naked girl there was escape from nothing. She perceived the logic of her shackled feet. Even with the aid of someone privy to her going there would needs be a session in the smithy - it would defeat any help she might be offered. The swirling chain had seemed only an emphasis; now she saw it for what it was: her most potent bond.

"Take me to the Smith bound as I am now, he'd do thy bidding and strike the rivets?"

"Hush, girl, 'tis treason talk. Dos't want a day upon the Rack, or a fine deep brand within thy pretty skin!" Wenna shook her handful of hair reprovingly as she put her hand upon a door. "See what cans't make of what thee find within."

The woman was of Gorlois: rich! Handsome, thirty-five or so, petulant, but her eyes bright with curiosity. Her hair was yellow and mismatched in a Norman Keep, her voice decisive.

"Wenna, for moment stay. I need thy help."

"Come here, girl."

Barbe clinked her few paces to the centre of the sparsely furnished chamber, Her

heart was pounding in a mixture of hope and apprehension. Obeying eloquent and demanding motions of a hand, she turned this way and that to be surveyed. The eyes assessing her betrayed only a sardonic amusement.

"Why has't none purchased thee, girl?" Thou art' a pretty piece?"

"I have naught to say in such matters, madam."

"A sweet pair of breasts. Have they been whipped?" Cold fear! Barbe tried to keep it from her voice: "No madam."

"Mmmm! 'Tis well. Ye've not been whipped much at all?"

Barbe had supposed The Abbey had whipped her very much indeed. But quick reflection told her that by the standards of Gorlois she had been lashed but little.

"No madam."

"Hmmmm! An omission easily remedied. Wenna, the two of us can do this task her shackles compel."

It was easy for them. She could not struggle. They stood her on the box and thrust the pole tween her chained legs. They hoisted the ends of it so that it thrust hard within the junction of her thighs, then secured it firmly on the trestles that would bear its weight and hers.

" 'Tis well her chain is long."

On each side the noose of rope bit into her ankle below the metal band. When each was threaded through its ring in the stone and pulled tight she sat astride the pole, her legs extended as far as her liberal chain permitted. Wenna took away the box.

"A sweet little pigeon on her perch. Come, Wenna let us tighten her tethers all we can to keep her safe."

It had happened so suddenly and without warning that the enormity of her plight took some moments to register. But when the pole on which she sat asserted its intimacy within her loins Barbe gasped in shock and pain. Her protest was involuntary.

"Oh please! Oh no!"

"Thank you, Wenna. I will summon thee."

Wenna had scarce been a friend. But with her gone, the girl prepared for torture felt friendless indeed.

"Please, madam, I cannot bear it! 'Tis awful!"

"Hush, girl. I did not place thee there for silly chatter."

Barbe stilled her tongue but could not contain a moan of anguish.

"Ye'll settle down to it. T'will keep thy attention while we talk."

Barbe longed to scream. What fresh absurdity had she to suffer now!" She craved to make some sense of her pain. "But, madam, I do not know thee."

"Like enough." The voice was bitter. "I'm M'Lord Gorlois's Saxon mistake. He fell in love once with my golden hair when he should have wed a Norman wench such

as thee. Now we go our own ways. He will not speak of me save when he must. Milord is absent now, so I'll whip his lemans for him - 'tis a joyous task. Mayhap I'll mark thy back as well and see the colour of Norman blood."

"I have done naught to hurt thee."

"You're Norman. That's enough."

Barbe's moans were grievous. What had been done to her had happened so quickly she was without defense. She felt obscene sitting naked on the pole that was burrowing into her most intimate maidenhood. The pain shooting up into her whole being from her crushed sex was of a new dimension. Her hands and arms contributed their own agony and aided her not at all. She could do nothing but sit there like a doll, anchored by the taut ropes upon her ankles that tugged, not only to each side, but down so as to add their own insistence to her weight. She could not move from where she had been placed. Body motion was possible but at the price of outrageous hurt. She sat still and eyed the Lady of Gorlois in wonder that one woman would hurt another in this way.

"Is there something thou woulds't have me do, madam?"

"Tongue my cunt you mean? Nay, tis a service any of his lemans are glad to do an' I hold a whip. It eases their solitude."

"I . . . I hurt so much, madam, the pain amazes me, I think I cannot be as ye would wish . . . talking . . ."

"What can ye do about it, girl?"

"Naught, madam–"

"My name is Ingrid, girl. The Lady Ingrid. Come, call me Ingrid. I'd hear the good Saxon name upon thy lips."

"Ingrid, I hurt beyond bearing."

"Good, T'will punish thy cunt for what it has not done."

Complacently, Ingrid placed a chair and made herself comfortable at the angle by which her victim's charms and agony were best observed. She sat and drank in the loveliness and the cruelty she had created. She was an artist viewing her work.

Barbe wept. The tears joined her moans to attest her desolation. To be punished thus to make a spectacle for a lonely embittered woman was so useless a cruelty. It was worse than being punished for a fault. It left her defenseless. She dared not ask how long she must sit upon the pole. It might be best not to know! She had a feminine wish to wipe the salt drops from her cheeks, but even this was denied. One by one they fell upon her breasts the breasts that might be whipped.

"I'd wipe thy tears, child, but they are fair to see."

"Please madam . . . Ingrid, oh please!"

"I could deny thy pretty pleadings with a gag, but they are as sweet as thy tears."

"Oh no! Oh, don't gag me."

"I have said I will not. But thy fear, too, is passing sweet. Thou art' a bundle of pleasure for such as I."

"Oh, Ingrid! Oh . . ."

"Thou has't a talent for suffering, girl. Milord knows not the treasure he has bought. Tell me of thy pain. Where dos't hurt?"

"Oh madam . . . Ingrid! Between my legs."

Ingrid laughed. "Ye like not the word. Say it."

"My cunt."

"Much better! I've wanted to do this to a Norman cunt for a long time. In case thou art' afeared, I'll tell thee that thy lips down there are soft and take much abuse. They'll not be ruined."

Barbe doubted the truth of it. Surely no part of any girl could be so hurt without injury. Thought of Mark passed through her memory. She might see him no more, but if she did she wanted not to be malformed to give him less than she had given him before. Her tears flowed afresh. The agony was splitting her asunder.

"Tell me of the Abbey of Gurnie, girl. The Abbess had thee so I'm told."

Barbe did her best between her moans. Her words came gaspingly, punctuated by shaming sounds she could not control.

"T'was she who whipped thee?"

"Yes."

"Ye enjoyed the lash?"

"No! Oh, Ingrid, no!"

"The stripes lit no fire in thee?"

The straddled girl lifted her pain lined features to look at her tormentor. "No, none. Oh, Ingrid, am I not as others? I love not the whip."

"Ye've had too little of it. I'd make thy box burn had I the time. I'd have thee lapping at my slit like a dog."

"Ingrid . . . Ingrid . . . 'Tis all I hear - this talk of tongues and . . . and that which is within my bush . . . and my body to be whipped. Is there naught else for me now?"

"What else might there be?"

"Liberty . . . never again?"

"Liberty! With those things riveted on thy ankles!" Ingrid laughed in genuine amusement "Ye're as much a part of Gorlois as one of the blocks of stone that make it's walls."

Barbe knew it true. Gorlois held naught but anguish. In desperation she humbly pleaded, "Ta'e me to the smith and have him strike them from me. Let me go. No one needs me here except to hurt."

"An' I do that I'd sit where thou art' now for a week and worse."

"He'd do that to his wife?"

"An' why not, if she betray him."

"Dost't not see it as a Saxon victory - please Ingrid?"

"Strung up naked and whipped! Where's the victory . . . and an endless time in a dungeon! come, girl, talk sense."

"I'm sorry. I hurt so much . . ."

"You are giving me much happiness."

"Could I not give thee more in other ways?"

"What ways, girl? come, I would hear of them."

"Whip me."

"I suspect ye lied? The whip heats thee after all?"

"Oh no, no, no!" Barbe wailed. " 'Tis because I hate it I asked for it. I thought but to pleasure thee in my pain."

"Hmmm! Well, perhaps. Has't other sweet thoughts?"

"I know little of tortures, madam - Ingrid. There must be some?"

"Ye must truly hate thy perch, little one, to plead for such. Has't not considered ye might be worse served than as ye are?"

"I do not know."

"Splinters thrust beneath thy nails, then lit. Thy sweet nakedness stretched upon the Rack so that thy breasts are flat and thy slit open?"

Barbe moaned. "Please, please . . . I'm sorry."

"Thy pretty perch feels not so bad now, eh?"

"Oh, Ingrid . . . please, please! I do not know. I am lost."

"You see, there is always worse. Tell me, Barbe, will ye service me with love when I release ye?"

"Yes."

"Gladly?"

"Aye gladly. Let me now."

Ingrid laughed. "Ye are a little fox. Ye'll not vacate thy place by blandishments. Sit nicely now, and tell me of the Lady Cornelia. I have heard much of Gurnie but seen it not."

"She punished me with an ash withe on my bottom and chained me by her bed o'nights."

Ingrid smiled delightedly. "Thou art' so well designed for the pleasure of women. Tell me more."

"Ingrid, please free me, let me down. I would love to talk."

"Ye sit as ye are."

"I hurt - oh I hurt!"

The older woman went to a chest against the wall.

When she returned she carried a short whip with slender thong. Thoughtfully and suggestively she trailed it across the captive's breasts. "The tongue, girl? Is it loosened?"

Barbe talked.

It was an hour later that Captain Brastias and two men entered the chamber.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The persistent urgency of the horse's trot or canter chafed Barbe's naked thighs. But she was used to it. The Gurnie tunic was not designed for riding. She judged it worth the discomfort to be able to glance sideways and behold Ingrid similarly bound and similarly clothed. The Saxon woman's clothes had been of the first casualties. Captain Brastias had come well prepared.

It had been swift and efficient. Brastias had placed a razorlike dagger at Ingrid's throat and told her what she must do. That she could cry alarm and have him killed he did not deny. But she herself would feel the blade cut short her life along with her cry. There had been no doubt of her compliance. One look into Brastias's eye and she had become very much a woman.

The smith did no more than jest as he beat the rivets from the irons on Barbe's feet. If it pleased M'Lord Gorlois to send these men with a message to his Lady t'was no concern of his.

The Lady Ingrid's order for her own palfrey and another to be saddled and brought forth raised no single eyebrow. The Saxon woman played her part as though an accomplice, but Barbe had seen her fearful glances at the dagger in the belt of Brastias, seen too her admiration for his maleness. When they were well beyond the village and among the trees of Avangel, Ingrid had shown no more hesitation than one brief pause and wide-eyed acceptance of the command to strip. She had donned the Gurnie tunic with only a cynical smile at its brevity. Then stood to have her wrists crossed at her back and bound. The cord used was the one from Barbe's freed elbows. Now that she knew herself safely bound and freed from the dagger's threat she freed her tongue.

"Ye come from Gurnie."

"Aye. And that's where you're going." Brastias was enjoying his dominion over her.

"Do I get ravished on the way?" She poured on insolence.

" 'Tis a good thought. We'll consider it."

"I know why Galleas wants the girl, but why me?"

"Mayhap he'll value thee more than Gorlois does."

"In his bed or his dungeon?"

"Most like for his Lady's amusement, or as a gift to The Abbess. Either one o' 'em would enjoy flogging Saxon skin."

"Will I not be held for ransom?"

"Will Gorlois ransom thee? I've hear different."

Ingrid flushed angrily. She had doubts on the score herself. But she was of an age and station to despise a leman's lot.

"You've got the girl," she retorted coldly. "Free me, and I'll get thee gold?"

"You're not mine to free, lady. Ye belong to Gurnie."

"Cut me loose and tell your master I escaped. He'll never know." She passed him a sly glance. "The three of ye can enjoy me to your heart's content. I've not been used much of late."

Brastias laughed. "Mayhap 'tis the rub o' the saddle on thy cunt, lady. Ye're hot and wishful to spread thy legs."

"Well, why not?" Her flashing glance was forthright.

"Howbeit' we stop and string thee up and splinter a few willow withes across thy proud rump? Ye'd feel thy saddle after, and mayhap have less to say."

The Lady Ingrid was unperturbed. "Do it an' it please thee. I've heard tell it hardens a man. I'll bear a sore seat without complaint."

"A man must admire thee, lady. Thou art' hard to faze. Woulds't remain in good temper should I tie thy elbows as ye had the maid's? T'was passing cruel. Mayhap a gag as well?"

Barbe saw the flinch and was secretly glad. It would do Ingrid good to ride. To ride for a day with her elbows joined by cutting strands. But the small cavalcade jogged on its way without the fateful pause. Ingrid knew the limitations of her new captivity. She would invite no pain without profit. She gave the captain a coy and reproachful glance, sniffed to show her disappointment, fluttered her shoulders against her bound wrists and rode on in silence.

"The girl's a witch," said Galleas stubbornly. "Methinks we should keep the Saxon prize and burn the lass."

"Don't be an idiot!" The Lady Cornelia had no patience for male gullibility. "Barbe's no more witch than I; someone helped her escape."

"Then we'll torture the silly damsel 'till she tells us who."

"She doesn't know. I'm sure of it."

"Ye want her unmarked for your pleasure, woman. Think ye I know not."

"Is that so bad! Ye give me little."

"A little stretching on the Rack, and she'd give us names."

Barbe quailed. She stood, her hands still bound, before the noble pair from whom she had escaped. She understood their puzzlement. The scarf and the keys were still a

mystery to her too. She had forborne to plague Mark with questions. Undoubtedly she had a friend in Gurnie, but she knew not who.

"What have ye done with Gorlois's Saxon dame?" Galleas chuckled. "She's downstairs hanging by her thumbs and a gag in her mouth. She clucks like a hen. T'will teach her silence."

"Get your ransom out of her. Leave me Barbe."

"The girl's worth twice the price. Who wants a Saxon?"

"She's good to torture. There's many as would value her."

"I'll try Gorlois. But 'tis believed he'll be glad to be rid of her. Take her yourself for thy pleasures. She's well favoured. Go see for thyself. She's one that improves with stripping."

"And what of the maid?"

"We'll use such tortures as leave her whole. I'll find a buyer. I've had no word from young Chantylon yet. She'd give him Norman brats enough to please the King. Henry values the name of Chantylon."

"Sire, I can tell thee nothing."

Barbe could remain silent no longer. The talk of torture was demoralizing in its impersonal disregard of what and who she was. To be stretched naked on a Rack! She had heard stories.

"We'll jog thy memory, girl. When thy young bones begin to creak ye'll sing as loud as any."

Barbe sank to her knees before the stern and uncompromising male. "My Lord, I beg of you. Have mercy. I cannot endure torture. I fear it most grievously. An' I knew anything I'd tell thee gladly."

"Leave the lass be."

Cornelia was concerned over probable loss. "Hand her over to your torturer and we'll get back a poor husk of a girl worth nothing. Her mind may break before her body. Hast' thought of that?"

"Humph!" Confronted with a superfluity of femininity he was at a loss. "I'll give her a night's sleep to think on it and build a bit o' strength for her questioning." he conceded.

"That's sensible. Let me keep her for the night."

"Oh, ho!" Galleas laughed, pleased by his own percipience. "You're aching for her tongue. Think I don't know."

"At least in my bed she'll sleep. She'll get little rest where you're like to put her."

Galleas gave sober consideration to what he saw as a challenge. "The girl or someone else has bested my dungeons twice." he mused dourly. " 'Tis time I won a round."

"You'll chain her in a dungeon again! You're a fool."

"We'll see about that." Galleas winked at his frightened captive. "What say ye,

girl?"

"Milord, I'm fearful of dungeons and their chains. I beg mercy. Chain me in M'Lady Cornelia's care, please sire?"

"Damn me, ye must have tongued the girl yourself; she's that anxious." He glared at his spouse.

"Oh, stop talking about tongues, man. Chain her to thine own bed if ye'd feel safer," Cornelia sneered. "She'd come to no harm."

"I'd like to break her maidenhead," Galleas admitted forthrightly. "But t'would be an expensive lay. I want no naked wench beside me who I cannot touch. A dungeon's the place for her. I'll have Brastias deal with it."

"Please, Lord . . . oh please . . . no!" Barbe was piteous. He paid no attention.

Brastias was cheerfully consoling as he led her below. Barbe's hands were still tied, his hand was in her hair. She might demur verbally, but that was all. "I'll get thee a few bits and pieces to soften the stone, lass," he promised. "If thee are to be tortured on the morrow ye'll need thy sleep."

"Brastias, how can a girl sleep knowing she's to be broken on the Rack tomorrow?"

He laughed at her concern. " 'Tis not like they'll break much o' thine, M'Lady, ye're precious. Just stretch thee a bit. I'll give thee a tip. Scream as loud as ye can. Don't play the heroine."

"Or might it be some other thing?" she asked timidly.

"Could be. There's ways enough. But remember: scream. Start early and keep it up."

"On the Rack . . . am I naked?"

"Aye. And for any torture. 'Tis handiest, and makes thee know thy condition." He thrust at a door. "Come, I'll show ye."

The Lady Ingrid of Gorlois hung naked. Barbe knew her plight all too well. Perhaps it was the same loops upon her thumbs. The mature nudity had taken on a fresh grace and symmetry in its stretched pain. Ingrid's toes were inches above the floor. Her face was drawn, but its contours were marred by the gag between her teeth and the strap around her cheeks that held it there. She turned to look at them with hope. A hope that quickly died when she beheld Barbe's condition and the man who held her.

"She's had an hour or so," Brastias said affably. "By the time her toes touch the floor again she'll have learned a bit o'humility." He grinned at the suspended woman. "Ain't that so, wench?"

Ingrid's eyes flashed fire. Brastias had been a disappointment to her, nor did she relish her plight. She turned haughtily away and refused to respond to his questions or his jibes.

"A night like that and a touch o'the lash tomorrow, and she'll be a model o'obedience."

As she was led away, Barbe wondered if indeed Ingrid would receive such cruelty. And yet . . . she did deserve it.

"Seems like ye slip out o'chains like an eel through a man's fingers," Brastias ruminated as he led her to the wall.

It was the same dark hole as had prisoned her before.

A hopeless miserable place for a winsome maid. Barbe look at the heavy links and shackles being sorted for her benefit, and asked fearfully:

"hast' orders on my chaining, or is it for thee to choose?"

"Ye seek easement, lass." He winked solemnly. "and I blame thee not. But I must do what I must. M'Lord Galleas is like to visit thee later, 'tis best thee be well ironed."

"It's cruel. They're beastly on me. I hate them"

"Aye, I'm sure ye do. But ye'll wear 'em just the same."

No sooner was the cord taken from her wrists than Barbe held them out for her shackles. She saw the motion as symbolic. Never, never would she be free. She stood, uncomplaining, while the brutal metal bands were fastened on her limbs and about her waist. She trailed chains as a tree trails ivy: wrists together, wrists to waist band, wrists linked to the shackles on her feet and great weight of metal cruel upon her slenderness. When she beheld the anvil and the hammer she came close to tears.

"I'm no smith, M'Lady, but I'll make ye safe."

Barbe had to kneel, then crunch lower so that her slight neck might rest upon the metal block and be fitted with the flat band that circled it snugly. When she felt and heard the insertion of the rivets in their slots she could not forbear to plead.

"Please, Brastias, not my neck. 'Tis a sore and trying thing to carry. Am I not helpless enough without it?"

"Oh aye, but 'tis my orders."

"But to be riveted on me! 'Tis the same as forever."

"Not while I'm around, M'Lady. Rest easy. I'll have thy neck ironed in no time."

"Please, Captain, iron me more elsewhere, but not my neck."

He chuckled amusedly. "Thy fair neck's the only place, M'Lady. The rest o'thee's well shackled already. Hold still now, I'll soon be done."

The naked girl tensed motionless while the hammer rang out the blows that expanded the bits of metal into the collar she could never remove and must wear like a badge of shame with its length of chain solidly hammered into the stone of the wall. It was as though she was some huge fierce beast to be restrained rather than a girl.

It was degrading beyond belief. She knelt. She fingered the iron which had become a part of her. To do so she was obliged to bend down to bring it within range of her fettered wrists. She was more helpless than she had ever been.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Why thank me, lass?"

"I think ye mean me no ill. You've been as kind as you're allowed to be."

He nodded soberly. " 'Tis a sorry plight for such as thee, M'Lady."

He brought her sacking. No doubt a generous amount by dungeon standards. He even helped her spread it on the damp straw. She was so manacled that it was hard to do herself. When he was gone she crouched in her chains and wept.

It was while she was struggling to find a hard comfort that her foot found her scarf. It was a small bundle hidden in the straw. In it were the keys. Her heart leaped with gladness. She had fitted the first of them in a shackle's lock when she remembered the collar riveted on her neck. It alone would hold her there. No key would loosen it. Galleas had won his round and bested her. For a moment she was tempted to free what she could of herself just for comfort's sake. But she refrained. To be discovered with but the riveted collar keeping her in place would be to invite torture indeed. Woefully, she bundled the faithful scarf and its metal load back into a tight ball and thrust it far out of sight as her chained foot would allow. Doing so she pictured Mark waiting somewhere in the night for a maid who did not come. Would someone tell him? Would someone know her defeat? What could he do?

Barbe wept anew.

Barbe's torture was cleverly staged. She supposed it an art of its own, possessing its own subtleties born of many screams. She had never been tortured before in so solemn a process as now unrolled to encompass her. The only true tortures she had known were the suspension by her thumbs and Ingrid's pole. This was different. She was not so naive as to fail to understand the potency of contrast.

She had been freed of her chains and bathed and perfumed and her hair combed by a troubled Gwenneth. Brastias had struck off the collar early and left her for the girl. The breakfast was bounteous. She even ate some of it as she trembled. She was allowed her tunic. She looked sadly at Gwenneth.

"I have no courage."

"Why should thee have." Gwenneth kissed her and consoled. "I would have none either."

"Why am I free?"

"It is a cruelty, Barbe. In a little while ye must walk to your torture as though to your wedding. Or, if ye prefer, kick and scream and struggle so that men will drag ye to it."

"Ye cannot lead me?"

"If ye are willing to walk in docile fashion to thy fate I can."

"I will do that. I promise."

"But I cannot stay with thee. When I deliver thee I must leave ye to his mercies."

"Do we know him?"

"I think not. He'll wear a hood. 'Tis to make him fearsome." Gwenneth looked dolorously at her charge. "There are some who, when he touches them, break down and speak."

"I cannot be one of them. Lest I lie?"

"I know not how to counsel thee. I think I would tell whatever lie they wanted if it

were me."

They held each other until it was time.

Barbe would always remember the walk. It was like no other she had ever trod. She knew herself beautiful. She had been made immaculate. Her limbs and neck were free of bonds. She walked to her torture truly as might a bride approach the altar, free of her own will. Gwenneth held her hand until the end. Dropping it, she fled.

He was male and muscular and masked. He bowed. Whether in irony or respect she would never know.

"Thy tunic, madam?"

She had forgotten it. "Ye want me naked?"

"An' it please thee, madam."

It did not please her at all, but she cast the scanty covering aside and stood before her torturer, nude. Her voice was bitter.

"Am I naked enough?"

He inclined his head and motioned to that which had demanded her attention since entering. She recognized it for what it was: The Rack. She would be stretched by it until she told what she did not know. For a moment she was tempted to tell a false tale immediately, but set the thought aside. They would suspect. Anything she might scream later would be doubly open to scrutiny. What was the use! What was the use of anything!

"You must tell me what I must do."

"Ye have courage, madam. I commend it."

She shrugged. "If I struggled ye'd force me, would you not?"

"It is to lie upon thy back upon the plank, madam." She saw the narrow strip of wood that would be her bed of suffering. With thudding heart she climbed over the wooden frame and disposed herself as he directed. Upon her back and naked she was a bride indeed!

She sensed his assessing scrutiny. But he made no demand. She lay as he wished. When he buckled the leather cuffs on wrist and ankles she did no more than inhale gaspingly as though doused with icy water.

He turned the winch.

She had expected instant agony. But there was none. He turned gently so that her arms and legs positioned themselves as they would be when her torture began: hands two feet apart, her legs the same. Her sex was open and exposed but not obscenely spread. She was naked enough but that was not her pain. When he had her tight, had heard her first gasp of knowledge she could no longer move, he slipped the pawl and stood looking down into her upturned face.

" 'Tis the custom to leave thee like this for a little while, madam."

"So that I become fearful and relent?"

"Aye. It happens."

"I cannot relent. I have nothing to tell. Dids't know?"

It was his turn to shrug. "So few have, madam. At the beginning . . ."

Why should he believe! She blamed him not. He must hear tales and excuses and pleas enough.

"I am sorry," she said humbly. "I will not burden thee with my innocence."

"I must instruct thee, madam."

She eyed him sharply. She could not move. She was beginning to hurt. What instruction could she follow!

He knew her thought, his eyes glinted. " 'Tis to tell thee, madam that I do not hear thy screams. They are all thy own."

Barbe had naught to say. She knew a great loneliness. "To tell thee, too, that when ye are ready to speak ye tell truth. Lies are often recognized. Then, when the truth comes, it is not believed."

"Since I have naught to tell, what will become of me?"

He gestured apologetically. "Madam, we do not know." He went away.

It was very quiet. She could see little save the ceiling. She was held taut enough so she could not raise or turn. The leather bands on wrist and ankle were tight enough not to slip under pressure. How clever it was to leave her thus with a foretaste of things to come, naked within the grasp of the monster designed to diminish her to no more than a cry of pain. She closed her eyes and tried not to think. The task was hopeless.

When he returned he stood beside her only long enough for their eyes to meet without communion. Without delay he turned the wheel. Her first scream was of shock. The pain did not warrant it. But she was tensed and expectant of agony. He paused long enough for her to smile an apology. Having done so she condemned herself for doing it. No apologies were required of her. A confession.

He turned again. She felt herself stretching everywhere.

Her breasts were beginning to flatten. Her joints and muscles screamed for her. At the next turn she screamed herself again, and at the next.

Her torturer removed the plank on which she lay. She was shocked to realize her weight was no longer on it. Beneath her back was air. She was stretched taut, suspended from her extremities. She could move only her head. She screamed steadily: not in memory of good advice but because she must. She screamed and screamed . . .

Nothing was hurried. If there was a charitable intent behind her torture the naked girl knew it not. She was bathed in pain and sweat and fear. A maiden on The Rack can not forget that she may be loosened only to crawl, to flounder with limbs no longer able to do her bidding. Broken, When the torturer's fingers traced a path the length of her tight nudity from neck to pubic hair, they slid wetly on her dew of pain.

"I would that thou woulds't speak, madam?" She could only moan.

"Nothing yet is broken. I have thee intact."

"Only lies–" she gasped. "I have naught else."

"The next turn of the wheel will be grievous, madam. Have mercy on thyself."

Barbe screamed. The hooded man placed his hand upon the wheel.

"Hold!"

The harsh command froze victim and torturer alike. It was the voice of Galleas.

Barbe heard sounds of heavy feet and the clank of weapons. Through the mists of torment she was aware of faces, more than one, examining her racked nudity. The authoritative voice was new.

"Is this the maid?"

"Aye, 'tis Barbe of Camelford. She's a stubborn wench and needs another turn." Galleas sounded aggrieved.

"Ye play with fire, man. Loose her."

"I paid gold for her. I hold her hostage. She's mine."

"She's thine no longer."

"Then, by the saints, whose is she!"

"She is the King's"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was a fairyland. A place of dreams. Wealth. Power, Kindness. The kindness of a King. Barbe moved and dwelt in ecstatic disbelief. The King's words forever in her mind.

"I have a need of thee, child. Have patience."

"But, your Majesty, I am but a girl–"

"Woman enough to have suffered much. Go thou with Griselda and do her bidding. She will tend thee." The Realm's first Henry chuckled with some private thought. "I'll give thee, too, the Saxon dame of Gorlois while we consider her disposal. Be not easy with her, she needs humility."

And thus it was.

Barbe held Griselda in awe. She was too beautiful and too poised and knew too much. Her quiet smile hid memories and secrets. She carried authority like a sceptre. But she was kind, treating Barbe with the deference due anyone in the favour of the King. It was she who took the glowing girl into the dungeon of Ingrid of Gorlois.

"She is thine, child. What think thee?"

The Lady Ingrid was chained to the wall by wrists and neck. She wore only the tattered remains of Gurnie's tunic. She glared at her visitors balefully. Her voice was a sneer.

"Hast' come to gloat, girl?"

"We will order her well whipped before she serves thee," Griselda decided equably. "She has many steps of humility to descend to make her a useful servant."

"Milord will have thy guts for garters for this," said Ingrid uncompromisingly.

"See what ye can make of her," Griselda suggested.

"I'll leave thee alone with her to try reason. Inform me of thy wishes, Barbe."

Alone, the former chatelaine of Gorlois stared cynically at the girl she had once tortured. "Do ye whip me now or later?" she demanded bitterly. "I'll never serve thee."

"Why speak of whips! I'm as lost as ye are. The King will have his way with both of us."

"He's got some noble Lord for thee. Ye'll be wed and fucked and spew out squalling Norman brats to bear a noble name." She grimaced in distaste. "I'd as lief stay in these chains."

"How dos't know?"

"Oh I know! T'was gossip before we were taken."

Ingrid shook at one of her shackles irritably. "The jailer who keeps these on me has a big mouth. It took only a good fuck to get him talking of the Court and what goes on."

"Ye gave thyself!" Barbe was aghast.

"And why not! 'Tis the only coin left me. There's enough of it. I'll get what profit it gives me 'ere it spoils of age."

"Ye need not be chained in this place. I have been given a most wonderous apartment. Why not share it?"

"And comb thy hair and lick thy feet?"

Barbe felt impatience. She had no cause to love this Saxon woman with her golden hair and frustrations. But there was a beauty and grace in her lithe strength that appealed. Ingrid stood with fists clenched against their shackles.

"I would be less cruel than ye to me."

"I'd like to have thy twat upon that pole and I can't get it there too soon."

"Would it serve thy temper an' I had it done to thee?"

"Ho! The high and mighty, eh! Split me and be damned. I'll be no menial."

It was Griselda who ended the contretemps. Laughing at Barbe's obvious distaste for cruelty, and Ingrid's intransigence; she ordered the protesting blond stripped and placed in the pillory. With her neck and wrists firmly in the clutch of the wooden yokes, Ingrid struggled and cursed, her fingers reaching fruitlessly, her nakedness twisting out of her own sight behind but visible to all who cared to examine it. She stood on one foot, then the other, striving for a comfort now lost.

"A punishment for peasants," she declared bitterly. "Let us feel her breasts," Griselda suggested. "They're a pretty pair and not yet marked."

"Whip them and I'll have thy hide."

"And her cunt. I'll vow 'tis wet."

"Damn you!"

Ingrid's fury chafed her neck and wrists but failed to even shake the massive structure in which she was held. Smiling her quiet confident smile, Griselda clasped and fingered her captive's most enticing recesses.

"Aye, she's wet enough. I'll get the whip."

"No!" The word exploded from Ingrid's lips.

"And why not?"

" 'Tis not meet to whip me. Ye forget my station, woman." Ingrid's voice held less conviction. "This thing ye've fixed me in is to shame a serf, not for whipping a lady of quality."

Griselda's voice was silk. "Consider, madam. All that below thy wrists and neck is most pleasing to our eye and most charmingly accessible. I am about to whip it well."

"I'll kill thee!"

"Nay, but the lash may kill thee, lest curb thee not thy tongue."

Griselda found herself a whip, and fondled it lovingly before the apprehensive eyes of the captive in the stocks. She then went behind and allowed the lash to trail across the prisoned naked back. Watching, Barbe saw Ingrid's eyes widen, her lips clench.

Griselda whipped the woman in the stocks without mercy and with a fine professional confidence. Barbe winced at each blow, but watched in fascination the changing lineaments of the face collared by the wood. Ingrid stubbornly refused to scream until the thong had painted a latticework of crimson where she could feel but could not see. It seemed a long cruel time before her screams gave way to the choking words Griselda sought.

"I'll yield, Damn ye, stop!"

The lash continued its rise and fall. "Forgive me. I'll obey."

"That's better, Ingrid. Another dozen?"

"Nay, enough ! 'Tis passing cruel."

"Ye've shown stubborness. And I've not touched thy thighs?"

"I cannot bear it. I've never been so used. Whip me no more, I beg of you. I'll obey the girl."

"With gladness and humility?"

"Yes, anything. I want no more of this."

"There was talk of killing and of guts. Five more for each."

Knowing the limit of her travail, Ingrid moaned steadily through the ten disciplinary strokes. When she was loosened at the end of them she crumpled to the floor, her face

in her hands, weeping. Between her sobs she muttered brokenly, "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . . ."

When the attendant came, Griselda said simply, "Clean and raiment her. Ye know what is suitable."

In a pleasanter place, Barbe could not contain her curiosity. She had a hundred questions and knew not where to start. Regal as Griselda seemed to the girl of Camelford, she was easy to approach. Sitting in their favourite room in the afternoon she made her most urgent demand.

"What is to become of me? Dos't know?"

Griselda enjoyed the younger girl's passionate need to know her fate. Without hesitation she explained. " 'Tis the King's favourite, the Sieur de Chantylon. He is young and given to flights of fancy. King Henry wants him wed to clip his wings."

"And produce heirs?"

The older woman laughed. "Say it not with such dolor, Barbe. I'd bear him a child and willingly if he'd bury himself in my sheath. He is most pleasing to the eye."

"Does he buy me, or am I a gift?"

"Ye are bitter from thy captivities, Barbe. I blame ye not. Ye are a most noble maid of Norman blood. Their bartering is past. Ye will got to the altar in all honour."

"And if I do not wish?"

"Ye will wish, girl. Take my word on 't."

Barbe sighed. She was no longer a captive, yet she was not entirely free. Word has gone to her father of her changed status. He would receive rank and honour. Wistfully she thought of Mark. She was elated and at the same time sad. She changed the subject.

"Ye whipped Ingrid with much skill. But I had thought . . . I had thought others . . ."

Griselda smiled. "Ye thought I was too much the Lady. Nay, I do but serve. An' I seem imperious to thee, 'tis but a sham. I am a woman and subject to a woman's limits."

"But you are so—"

"Because I whipped the Saxon! The lash and I are old friends. It has been used on me often, and I've striped enough serving wenches to gain some skill."

For a moment Barbe thought she had not heard aright.

"On thee! Whipped! Oh, that cannot be."

"And why not, child? I was but a King's leman once, and now I do his work and live royally in return, but when I irk him I am whipped."

"But he seemed kind?"

"M'Lord Henry is kind indeed. But he metes out his penalties according to his temper. He is, after all, a King."

"But whip one he has loved!"

"Ah, Barbe, ye are so young, so innocent. Had we a choice 'fore we are born we'd all be men. This is their world. Never doubt it. A woman does as she is told. If she prevail at all it is by guile."

Barbe returned Griselda's bright amused smile with a wry one of her own. She was forever glimpsing new vistas and forever amazed or dismayed by what she saw. Her one time life at Camelford seemed a rustic uninformed haven far away. Watching the play of emotions across her ward's lovely face, Griselda hesitated for a moment in doubt before she said gently:

"There is something I had intended thee not to behold. But if ye live at Court 'tis best thee know the rights of things. Come, see, and be not distressed."

"But, Griselda, if 'tis a thing I should not see . . ."

"There's neither right nor wrong to it, Barbe. It's but a thing over everyday. I wish it was not to be, but since it is, I shall make the best of it."

She had spoken.

"You mean-?"

Griselda's smile was free of care. "Ye have guessed my secret. Our Liege has sentenced me to be whipped."

"But why? You of all–!"

"I chose to be impertinent. I had not guessed his liver out of sorts."

"And for that–?"

"Aye, twenty lashes. Naked."

Barbe was appalled. "But when, how?"

"Oh 'tis done in a most civilized manner, child, so long as it is done today. In my own time I go to . . . to where such things are done and instruct the Executioner in his duty."

"Oh no! It is too–"

"It is indeed. But it is the King's wish. I tell my hooded friend the manner and severity of my punishment and how I must be bound. Then I yield my body and my limbs."

"Today?"

"I had thought to have it done after I leave thee for the night. But let us go and have it over with."

"Not for me. Not just so that I–"

"Nay, child, for me. I'll be glad to have done with it. My sentence is like a load to carry. When I bear its marks I can put it in the past. Come. And let us both smile. I want no tears from thee."

Hand in hand they found the dark cold steps.

For the maid of Camelford it was like so much of her past weeks, a thing needful of being seen to be believed. The place was horrific, the man fearsome in his mask. But the exchange was pure courtesy.

"My sorrow, madam. It is the maid?"

"Nay, it is myself again, Guymon. Ye will think me an ill behaved baggage."

"Never, madam. 'Tis always with regret. But the maid–"

"She is new at Court and has need to see and to hear. What you and I do now will paint a pitfall she had best remember."

"Aye, madam, there are none so high they may not visit me."

"I am to receive twenty lashes, Guymon."

" 'Tis a 'plenty."

"Aye, old friend. I pleased His Majesty not at all."

"And of what severity, madam?"

Griselda laughed ruefully. "He said for me to tell ye to make me shed tears. I suppose it means neither thy strongest or thy most merciful. I leave it to the judgement of thy arm."

"And naked, madam?"

"How else!" Surely there are none ye whip clothed?"

"True, madam. Yet for thee it seems most wrong." Griselda turned to Barbe who was taking in the pleasant exchange in open mouthed amaze. "You see, Barbe, even Guymon sees me as do thee. Yet I am most fallible Come, help me with this gown."

Barbe relished not this stripping of her mentor. But it was something to do with her hands, the filling of a vacuum. She nimbly dealt with buttons and folded carefully. The ivory loveliness revealed was no less than she had expected. Griselda was more beautiful naked than clothed.

"Bound Madame?"

Griselda made a small moue of disparagement. "I fear so. I have not the courage to stand or kneel for thy bites."

"Tell me thy wish, lady?"

Griselda considered prettily, finger beneath chin. "Let me clasp the post, Guymon, as though in the embrace of love."

"A wise choice. It protects thy breasts."

Griselda stiffened in pride. "I do thee an injustice. Thy lash has never touched them. Ye have been always kind. I will stand exposed tied by my wrists."

Guymon paused, hesitant. "Only as ye wish, lady."

"As I said, so that I must stand at arm's length from protection."

It was done. Barbe watched, breathless, as the pale warm nudity placed its wrists at chin level to have them clamped in iron on each side of the stout timber. When this was done, Griselda could move neither forward or back. She would stand open to the whip. The freedom of her feet would aid her not at all.

"And the lash, madam?"

"The usual, Guymon. The one chosen for me long since. The single thong without metal or knots."

"Thank you, madam. I could never use the others on thy beauty."

"You could an' ye had to," Griselda said bitterly.

"Mayhap the day may come."

"From knees to neck, lady?"

"Nay, not my thighs, Guymon. They hold too cruel a pain. Next time perhaps, if it be soon. For now, the rest of me."

The tableau held its own strange beauty. Barbe watched, transfixed by an unexpected loveliness in the woman who suffered and the rhythmic whine and slap of the leather upon the helpless skin. Guymon flogged his lady with a slow precision almost hypnotic to the watcher's eyes.

Griselda stood. It was as though her pose was voluntary. Barbe knew it possible only by virtue of the metal bands upon the slender wrists. No girl or woman could stand motionless for the cracking slashes that beat steadily at the proud back and buttocks. But, even so, her fortitude was breathtaking. She stood erect, one knee bent. Her head held high at first, but as the lashes counted their way upward from the first she allowed her cheek to fall and nestle against her bare bound arm. It was her only recognition of what was being done to her, other than the gasping and laboured breathing that punctuated the impacts on her flesh.

"It is done, lady."

Griselda lifted her head from its hurt refuge and nodded thankfully. She was panting and bedewed with sweat.

"I have spaced them well, madam. They may be counted with dispatch."

"Thank you, Guymon. I doubt not my Liege will admire thy work."

"I treasure my time with thee, lady. But I pray our next meeting be distant."

Griselda managed a small grin. "Aye. I will curb my tongue. Do ye loose me now, and Barbe may help me dress."

When Guymon left them they shared a task of love. Griselda made light of her wounds, and only shivered tenderly when her shift made its way upon her ravaged back. When night came and it was time for sleep, she kissed her youthful charge most lovingly and long, before she went away.

The day had taxed emotion. Barbe slept deep and long. She made the unconscious motions of slumber and knew them not. The cord upon her wrists failed to register in her mind until the final moment of drawing tight the noose which clamped them tight behind her back. When she flashed into wakefulness and opened her mouth to scream, a wad of wet rag was neatly inserted over her tongue and bound tight with cord knotted at the back of her neck. "We've got the little bitch!" The exultant voice

was Ingrid's.

There were two of them, one a man. Barbe guessed it would be the jailer seduced by Ingrid's hot sheath so willingly bartered. She was flipped onto her stomach, her face buried in the pillow. Her nightgown was rent from her cringing nakedness, and a hard and determined knee thrust at the small of her back. She could not fight. She could do nothing.

Her binding was important to them. They took time with it. To the girl herself there was a desolating familiarity about what was being done. The snug bands were tight upon her wrists and the harsh clamping together of her elbows to accommodate the circling ropes. With a cruel dexterity her hands and arms were rendered impotent. The protesting sounds she made into her gag at the pain of her strictures were ignored. So brutal had been the tying of her arms that she now lay upon her breasts, thrust forward by her wracked shoulders. It had been done to her before and she hated it! She lay thus while her ankles were bound, and then her knees, the coarse strands biting hard. She had become a helpless bundle.

The simile was made real. They used the rug under which Barbe had slept. She was wrapped tight in it, then laced from heels to neck. It covered her face and hair but was left loose enough for her to breathe. She was hoisted over a male shoulder and carried, carried she knew not where. But it was a long journey. Her bearer was breathing hard by the time she was thrown into the cart.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I expect ye need to pee," said Ingrid.

The man laughed coarsely. "Sweet little piece, ain't she!"

The demand of nature was indeed strong within the bound girl. She looked up at her captors from her resting place upon the fallen leaves beneath the tree. Her rug was gone, she was naked. It was night. The jailer had built a small fire and was preparing food. The horse and the cart were a dark blob beyond the radiance of the flames.

Ingrid held a knife. Lifting one of the helpless girl's nipples in a cruel clutch of finger and thumb she placed the edge of the blade against the stretched flesh. Her threat was grim. "One wrong word, a scream, a try for escape and I slice thy tit. Understand?"

Barbe nodded desperately. She was still gagged. "Remember, girl, we've far to go, and you'll be tempted. But you'll be naked. Whatever befalls laken and I by fault o'thine I'll make sure ye lose thy tits before I'm taken. You'll do well to behave."

Barbe's nod was vehement. She had a great need of release.

The pair were well equipped. They loosed her feet and locked a chain on one ankle and its other end to a slender tree. Then they loosened her bonds. "Run all ye want, Barbe of Camelford." Ingrid invited grimly.

The naked girl did not run. The chain tether was not long enough to please her modesty, but she strode to its full span and there did what she must. It was within their view, but she did not care. Barbe cared for little at that moment. The pains of nature dealt with, she could think only of her plight and the chain upon her ankle. She plucked the wad from her mouth and offered it obediently to the waiting hand of the golden haired woman who owned her once again.

"Eat, girl. We'll treat thee well an' ye behave."

Barbe ate and listened. They had stolen gold. They would traverse the land as peasants. When there was danger she would be firmly bound and gagged beneath the rug in the cart. They would camp in the woods, avoiding villages. Their destination was Gorlois. The Lady Ingrid had discovered which side her bread was buttered. Barbe was a peace offering to her Lord. There was also a score to settle.

"Thy serving wench, eh!"

Ingrid was still smarting under the indignity. She was not one to forget.

"And whipped to make me humble - in the stocks like a common slut."

"T'was not my doing," Barbe protested.

"Nay, but ye stood and watched. Ye've seen me naked and scourged like a whore. Have ye considered, Barbe my darling, how little ye've been lashed?"

"Ye hurt me bitterly, Ingrid, on thy pole. I sought no revenge."

"Maybe, but I do. Before we sleep I'll mark thee well." The familiar fear, the repeated threat! It hovered forever on the skin of the naked girl. Barbe's eyes were piteous. "Please don't whip me, Ingrid. I've done naught to deserve it."

"Aye, ye're right enough, lass, " Ingrid conceded without venom. "But I've got to work off a bit of honest hate. Since I don't have that Griselda bitch of Milord Galleas ye'll have to do."

"But that's not fair!"

Freedom from bonds and the good food had brought Barbe's normal reactions to life. She fought for her skin. Looking from one to the other of her captors she strove for reason.

"Ye've frightened me. I think ye'll keep thy threat to cut me . . . my . . . nipples if I make trouble. So I'll behave. I'll obey you completely. Whipping me won't make me a bit more obedient or do good at all except make me like ye less. Please!"

"The lass makes sense." said Jake, gnawing a bone. "Neither of you make sense," Ingrid proclaimed crisply. "I'm going to tan thy bottom well for thee, Barbe. When 'tis done ye'll feel a new humility and love me no less. See if I'm not right."

It was the captive girl who cleaned up after the meal.

The chain dragging at her ankle hindered her little. She was told what to do and how. She obeyed meekly, her mind seething unhappily at thought of what lay in store.

"Ye see yon willow bush?"

"Yes, Ingrid."

"See an' ye can reach it."

Barbe dragged her chain to its limit. She could get her hands into the foliage. Ingrid tossed a knife.

"Cut thyself a half dozen good switches, trim 'em and bring 'em to me."

The order was deliberately cruel and demeaning, but, cringing inwardly, Barbe cut the wicked lengths that would stripe her skin. She had made up her mind to provoke Ingrid as little as possible. As she trimmed the withes in readiness for her punishment her mind raced upon such possibilities of escape or rescue as she could see. There were none deserving of hope. Dutifully she tendered the knife and the willows to the Saxon woman who would whip her.

"Yon's a good girl," Jake approved.

"Shell be better when I'm done with her," Ingrid approved cheerfully. "Get thee to thy tree, Barbe."

It was simply done. The girl to be whipped was told to place her forearms before her face, one on each side of the slender trunk. Ingrid bound them there. A stricture at each wrist, another at each elbow. Barbe was well held in somewhat the same posture as Griselda had chosen for her own travail. Barbe remembered that moment then, and trembled now. She had made her own vow not to plead, but she was bitterly afraid.

"Please, Ingrid, I beg of you, don't whip me. I promise I'll do everything you want me to. I'll even help you."

The bound girl looked back over her shoulder in appeal. But all she saw was the flash of Ingrid's arm. She turned back to her tree and closed her eyes.

Ingrid had been correct in contending her prisoner had been but little whipped. If standards exist in such things Barbe had got off lightly enough. What she received now did indeed even up the score. That the infliction was purely punitive made it doubly hard to bear.

"Just thy pert seat, Barbe. Ye'll be riding no horses." Ingrid slashed with a will. In pure shock and bitter pain, the tethered girl pulled against her bonds. They held her well so that no matter how she writhed her bottom was well offered for its next cut.

"Mayhap this makes thee know thy place, girl:"

"Oh yes! Oh yes . . . oh please!" The blows continued, slow, measured, and savage. The first of the willows shredded and broke. Ingrid cast it aside and chose another.

"What are ye, Barbe?"

"Your thrall, Ingrid. Oh, please no more."

The second withe joined its fellow. Each had done yeoman service. The tied girl's bottom was streaked scarlet.

"And what d'you owe me?"

"Obedience." Barbe was sobbing. "Oh, Ingrid, is not that enough. The hurt is awful. I promise I'll obey."

The Saxon woman paused long enough to push her hand between the wet thighs below the striated flesh. She grasped and clutched, then showed her wet palm to Jake. They laughed delightedly.

"The little bitch's in heat."

Barbe moaned her protest. She struggled constantly against her bound arms. She could not help it. The act was instinctive. As the willows cut her again and again she

frantically tried to evade the predictable slashes, but found that in any posture her bonds allowed her bottom was inevitably well presented for the purpose in hand. She wept and cried and suffered.

"And what are you going to be, dear girl?"

Barbe had abandoned pride. She wanted only cessation of the cuts that made her believe her bottom to be in shreds. "I will be good. Oh, Ingrid, I'll be so good. Please stop beating me! I promise I'll behave. Ohhhhh! Ahhhh! Oh Ingrid–"

When the last switch was cast aside and the punished bottom a curve of fiery red, they untied her arms, shortened her chain so that she could reach nothing, threw her the rug and left her for the night. Barbe found what cover she could and lay there sobbing. Beneath the rug her hands gave what solace they could to her wealed skin.

On the resumption of their journey in the morning, Barbe meekly offered herself to be bound and trussed in the rug. She even opened her mouth for the gag, though her eyes were anguished as it was bound into her mouth. "What did I tell thee!" Ingrid exulted. "Thy tender seat improves thee mightily."

The prisoner nodded humbly. She supposed the acknowledgement of her defeat was expected. She was shamingly conscious that the thrashing of her bottom had indeed engendered a wish to please. Her passivity was spontaneous in a manner not previously demonstrated. She hated herself but accepted what she must. She wept only occasionally through the jolting day as the ropes had their way with her and she lay helpless in the cart.

It was rain that drove them to the farm. It was their coin that made the peasant, his wife and their vapid son accept the captive. Barbe did not know what story Ingrid told to account for her, but it must have been convincing. The couple obligingly insisted on aiding in the binding of the naked girl to a post within the tiny barn which she shared with a couple of milk cows for whose warmth she was grateful. Alone with Ingrid after she had been firmly tied, Barbe's plea was pitiful.

"Ingrid please, not like this for the night?"

"Nay, love. But it pleased the yokels to make thee safe. I'll bring the chain and locks in time for ye to sleep."

A captive girl has little enough of happiness. Barbe found herself bitterly resenting her loss of evening freedom. She had been given a few minutes without bonds and left to herself to enjoy them with the cows, but now she must stand against the post, her hands tied in back of it, another rope round her belly. She knew there were more arduous ways of being tied, but it was a disappointment. It was bad enough to be bound immovably through the day. But now this!

It was the youth who brought her supper. He was perhaps thirteen. Certainly he should not have been given the freedom of a naked girl. His eyes bulged, his lips were wet and loose. Barbe longed to hide herself. "Please cover me," she begged.

"What for? You cold'?"

His mental processes were slow. She tried again. " 'Tis wrong to see me like this. You must cover me, anything."

Instead of answering he pinched her left nipple. While she was still gasping with the pain he thrust meat into her mouth. She chewed frantically to retain her only weapon, speech. While so employed her right nipple was tweaked.

"Them's bigger'n mine."

More meat whether she wanted it or not. While masticating she endured his fingering search of her pubic hair. It seemed unlikely she would enjoy her supper.

"Ye ain't got no cock," He sounded aggrieved.

"I'm a girl, silly," She got the exclamation out past a chunk of beef.

"Aye, that'll likely be the trouble. A girl!"

She ate hastily while he fumbled. It was in her mind to ask him to untie her hands. But fear of Ingrid's wrath forbade. His interest was now centering on her sex. Stuffing her mouth, he knelt and peered into the orifice his fingers had located.

"That be where they fuck 'ee?"

"No. No one does that to me."

"I be willing?"

"I mean I'm the wrong kind of girl."

"There's two kinds?" He eyed her suspiciously.

"Ask you father?"

He fed her more. "Want ter get rid o' me, eh?"

"Oh no. Thank ye for feeding me."

He fed her studiously, his mind hard at work, When the last scrap had gone and the water too, he rendered his decision.

"I'm going ter fuck 'ee."

Barbe cursed the yokels and her captors. They should have had more sense than to expose the boy to such temptation and herself to his attention. She clutched at a straw.

"It's kind of you. But ask permission first. You mustn't get into trouble."

"It's asking 'ud get me trouble." His gaze was suspicious. "You don't want to be fucked." He tugged at a rope. "You sure 'ee can't get loose?"

"No, I can't get loose. Look, I'm tied tight." she struggled to demonstrate for his benefit.

He unfastened the front of his trousers and produced a phallus of unimpressive proportions but ardently rigid. The captive's hopes rose; tied as she was she might defeat him. But her feet had not been bound. He kicked them apart and pressed close.

"Help!"

Barbe got out the single cry before his hand found her mouth. He used the other to torture her breast. "Keep quiet, see?"

She saw. The pain was sickening. She nodded in assent.

The hands fell away. Don't hurt me! Don't hurt me! She was gasping, almost with

nausea.

"Ye keep quiet?"

"Yes, oh yes!"

He tried once more to pierce her, but without success.

His elevation and his aim were both awry. "I'm afraid I'm no good for it," she offered hopefully.

"It's that there being tied."

Barbe's heart leaped as he began to fumble with the knots. To be free! The thought was exhilarating. And yet, there would be four people and a boy bent on her recapture. The boy himself was a hazard. She held herself tense and uncomplaining while he worked.

"I knows what ye're thinking," he smirked.

Like the fires of hell, ye do, thought Barbe. "Unwrench me, ye buxom lad," Barbe said, using her most feminine wiles on the dull witted sod. "Unwrench me and I'll help you learn the greatest joy a man can have - fucking."

The dullard grinned, spittle gushing from his pock marked chin as he untied Barbe from the fetters in which she had been bound. His puny cockmeat throbbed in anticipation of the joys she promised.

Free! Barbe breathed her first breath of unfettered air as the lad dropped the ropes from her wrists and prepared to mount the lusty wench.

Her foot caught the side of his head and he fell face down in the morbid mud and she leapt upon his head, grinding his ugly pug in the oozing slosh.

He gurgled as he drowned, the naked wench standing atop the back of his head, her fulsome breasts heaving with the air of promised freedom.

When at last his breath subsided and the wriggling corpse was still, Barbe tenderly stepped from his head into the mud.

They would be after her in a nonce, she thought. Quickly, take thyself hence.

She turned and ran, naked into the covering copse that abutted the place where she was bound.

The faggots lashed her creamy flesh as she ran naked into the trees. Her welts and scars she would proudly wear when she reached the freedom that lay beyond whatever and wherever it might be.

The unknown fate was preferable to the unrelenting wretchedness from which she fled.

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