

# THE HOUSE OF ISSTENS.

By Sir D'Arctagan Isstens, Cadet of a Great House, Knight of the Royal Order of Wassmark and One Time Ambassador to the Court of Charles I of England.

MADE INTO A ROMANCE BY THEODORE ROBERTS.

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## CHAPTER III.

### THE ROBBER CAPTAIN'S DAUGHTER.

In a few days things had taken on very much their old faces. Five prisoners, being robbers and murderers, were hung, but out of sight of the house. My prisoner, whom we called "the captain," was kept for ransom. So I told the men, but I doubt if I would have let him hang under any circumstances, for he fascinated me strangely. He was prisoner in my chamber and fed from our own table. We took him all manner of books, which he read with pleasure. Harry, who was a wonderful scholar, far beyond anything I could hope for, used to argue with him over Homer and Caesar, and sometimes they wrote songs together. Then they would have me in to hear the songs, which, I must say, were very learned and not a little uncommon.

The crops were put in and life went on in the cottages and fields, as well as in the house, very much as it had before the great robbery raid.

One morning I was seated on a stone bench half way down the avenue of beeches, dreaming of things which the captain's songs had started in my brain, when on raising my head I saw a lass tripping toward me up the road. She was robed in all manner of fine silks, like my mother on occasions, and had white gloves on her whiter arms. Merry golden curls fell down from under the great feathered hat.

"By the long sword, here comes that court lady after Harry," I muttered to myself, and straightway rose and bowed, hand on heart in the latest mode. She answered with a fine courtesy.

"Are you the lord cadet of Isstens, sir?" she asked, gazing sweetly.

I could see now that her face was wan and her eyes red from weeping.

"I am the cadet of the house, madame, but without a title. Perhaps it is my brother, the viscount, you would see?" I bowed low after each word.

"Nay, sir, it is the brave cadet. I hear he captured my father with his single sword, and took him into the house kindly, as became a gentleman," she said very softly, looking at me with wonderful eyes all the while.

"What?" I cried. "Are you the robber captain's daughter, madame?" And I fell to staring at her like a great fool. She flushed haughtily at that.

"I am Captain Castletree's daughter—yes. Does it offend your ears, my lord?"

I was confused woefully. "Do you want to take him away, madame? He is very quiet and is helping my brother write verses," I gasped.

The lady laughed merrily at my speech and face.

"I would like to have him, Sir Cadet, but I do not want to spoil your brother's rhymes."

I recovered from my confusion. "Let us talk it over. You know he is a prisoner of war," I said, bowing.



She answered with a fine courtesy, her to the seat. I thought to impress her with the greatness of the favor she asked, so continued, "The four other captives were hung."

She flashed her eyes at me.

"Because they were common scum," she cried, "do you think they had no souls?"

"I don't think they had, madame, for they were the foulest rogues and murderers under heaven. The captain is a man of breeding and may not be a rascal, after all. At any rate I have kept him safe, and we are fond of him now."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried. "I have sinned in speaking so to you. May God bless you for your sparing hand."

The tears sprang to my own eyes at the words of her forgiveness.

"It was very little to do. It was a pleasure," I stammered. Then, "May I take you to your father, Mistress Castletree?"

She accepted my proffered hand, and together we went up the avenue and through the great gate of the house of Isstens.

## CHAPTER IV.

### "DO YOU LOVE HER, VISCOUNT?"

Can you imagine the stir all through the house when I ushered in the captain's daughter, splendid in her silks and sunny smiles? Out came my father and bowed like a gallant of 20. Out came my mother and swept the floor with a grand courtesy. Mistress Lyons cried, "Bless her dear English face!" and kissed her.

Ah, thought I, Castletree is an English name, is it, and I gracefully presented Harry, who could not have come faster to meet the court lady whose hand he had kissed.

I ran and released my prisoner, who came down and received that little form—silks and curls, great hat and all—into his arms with a cry of joy. He told her how kind we had all been to him—a foreign outlaw, a leader of robbers—and we blushed and wished we had been 20 times kinder.

Then the maiden was taken off under my mother's wing, and we men held counsel in the little dining parlor.

"I am clear of the robbers," said the big captain, "and I swear"—he did in English—"that I would plow like a peasant sooner than return to them."

"You are a worthy gentleman, sir," said the baron, "and how you came to mix and fight with such dogs I cannot see."

"That—my reason for it is a closed page of my life," answered the Englishman. "Enough, my lord, that I was once happy in my own castle in Devon, with a sweet wife, honor and wealth, and now"—And he burst into tears.

The sight of a strong man in the agony of weeping is ever a pain to me.

When he recovered himself, my father offered him a position in the household, to make him and Mistress Castletree of the family. My heart rose at that.

The captain looked up proudly. "Can I earn our bread, my lord? Is there work for me to do?"

The baron, who was slightly the elder of the two, took his hand.

"There is work, my friend, for a true gentleman with a true sword in the house of Isstens. Will you swear to be loyal to this family until this family or some member of it is disloyal to you?"

"I swear it on my honor," said the captain.

I slipped out and getting his surrendered sword from my room returned and placed it in his hands.

"Not this sword," he said. "I will purchase a new one from the house of Isstens." And he broke the little blade across his knee and handed me back the two pieces.

"It was not the sword I used in the service of my old king. Neither will I use it in the service of my new lord, the Baron Isstens," he said, smiling sadly.

And thus the house of Isstens was increased, and life seemed to be merrier and more worth the trouble inside the gray old walls.

The captain knew a great deal about farming and even more about weapons and the drilling of men. Soon all the people on the estate, including old Red Harding, looked up to him with love and respect, and some of them whispered that he had been a prince in his own country.

Blithely, like red petals blowing from a bush, went the days through May and June. The brigands lay close in their mountain fastnesses, evidently crushed by our brave defense, the slaughter at the gates and the hanging of the captives.

The peasants returned to their work, the foresters and keepers to the woods, the plowmen and sowers to the fields, and the young grain was green over the uplands. Captain Castletree was everywhere. For three days he tramped about in the forests with a squad of axmen marking the lumber to be cut for building and where the underbrush was to be cleared out for firewood. I wondered if he ever thought of the Isstens fagot he had tried so heartily to use over my head.

There was a second ditch to be run through the swamp, and the captain marked the best course for it, and even helped at the blasting out of rocks with his own hands. And yet a finer and prouder gentleman could not be found in Wassmark, where it is said the nobility cannot bend to pick up their gloves should they happen to fall.

It did not take me many weeks to discover that I was deeply in love with Mistress Castletree. Her other name was Marion, which both Harry and I thought very pretty. My brother made verses about it and read them to us on the south terrace. Sometimes my heart ached that I, too, could not write dancing rhymes to bring smiles to her lips. I looked at Harry through a green light and said all manner of unpleasant things to him, and for answer he would only eye me and smile.

One day I caught him by the shoulder—we were alone—and cried, "Do you love her, viscount?"

At first I thought he was about to say "No!" but his face changed and he cried: "Fie, fie, my dear cadet! And what if I do?"

"Yes, poor cadet," I hissed. "Oh, but the cadet has a sword, and by all the devils it is not an easy one to get beyond!" With horror at my words I turned away. Quick as a flash he was at my shoulder.

"Don't worry, old fire eater," he said, laughing; "there is some one in Blatenburg, you know." And then he broke off and began to sing. I rushed after him and craved pardon humbly for my hasty words. We went out together and found Marion on the south terrace looking out across the valley with dreamful eyes.

Harry had a slip of paper in his hand. "Listen to Dart's first poem," he said, the while I stared at him speechless.

He read:

"Sweet of the golden hair,  
Here to your feet I bring  
Sword and heart and hand,  
Truer than heart of king."

"Know that the sword is real  
E'en till this life is done—  
Know that my heart is thine,  
Sweetest Maid Marion."

Here the viscount turned and fled, leaving me gazing at Mistress Castletree and she at the sky. Her face was crimson, and I think mine was too. "By all the little blue devils"—I remembered myself and fled away also.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE KING'S SUMMONS.

When I found Harry, he was convulsed with laughter, lying on the couch in our chamber. I could not challenge him to fight, so I sprang upon him with my knees and said that I would both write and read my own poems in the future.

When next I met Marion, she flashed her eyes at me in a haughty way that raised both terror and admiration in my heart. She did not go down to her seat on the south terrace for three days after the jester play of Harry's. How to mend matters I did not know, though I pondered over it continually and forgot my sword exercise and all interest in quarter staff. But one night a plan dawned upon me, and I begged Harry to give me the verses. He did so without questioning, and going up to my room I scrawled beneath them: "This is all true: I swear it, though Harry wrote the rhymes, D'Arctagan."

Then I put the paper into her silver cup down in the dining hall and went up to bed. Scarcely had I got clear of my boots when in came Lieutenant Red Harding.

"Up, sir, and into saddle for Blatenburg, at the king's command," and off again to find Harry, who was somewhere reading Caesar. I pulled on my riding boots, changed my silk coat for a leather jerkin with steel breastplate, buckled on my sword belt, and, hat in hand, clattered down stairs.

Harry, Red Harding and I, with 12 horsemen, were to answer the king's summons, leaving my father and the captain with the rest of the men to guard the house.

The mother came out to bid us good-speed, but no Marion; so away we started on the 30 mile road to the king's city. Harry jested so that the men shook till I thought they would roll from their saddles. I did not feel unusually gay, which I think was quite natural. While Harry and Red Harding chatted merrily I rode at the lieutenant's left, silent as the dead. After five hours on the road, which was muddied to the fetlock most of the way, the dawn broke in front of us. We dismounted at a little hostel and drained a cup, while the fellows fed our horses a bite and rubbed them dry with handfuls of straw. I washed Hagart's mouth out myself, for he is a fine horse and too good to be trusted to every wayside stable boy.

Before the sun had risen a pale width above the fir trees we were mounted again. Half an hour later we rode into Blatenburg, the king's city, and by the light on the viscount's face one might have thought it was his.

The streets were alive, early though the hour was, and armorers had their forges going—and the smiths, too—for many of the incoming horses had cast their shoes. The great houses, the hurrying people and the bright faces made what seemed to me a wondrous brave sight. Our leader, Harry, took us far into the city, and there ordered us to dismount at a big inn not far from the royal palace. Out of the saddles we climbed, glad enough to be rid of them. Our horses were led away, and we went inside to breakfast. The landlord took us to the highest table, while a drawer hustled our men in to a spread of ham and beer.

"Have you heard anything of the Bohemians?" asked Harry.

"Baron Vossogoff defeated them last night 18 miles to the north, my lord," answered the fellow, with a broad smile. "Thank God!" we cried, and drained to the health of Baron Vossogoff.

Harry, as our captain and representative of the house of Isstens, must go up and report to the king, but Red Harding and I, belted and spurred, sallied out arm in arm to view the city.

I think we were a fierce looking pair by the way the other soldiers turned to stare at us. I wore gold across my breast and the mark of the cadet, together with the Isstens' crest on my sash, and Red Harding was bravely trigged out with lace and gold, polished brass and scarlet. Though ladies waved their scarfs to us from the windows and balconies of the tall houses and men saluted us in the streets, my heart would not away from the gray house of Isstens.

When we returned to the tavern, Harry was awaiting us. He was most beautifully dressed in satin and lace. Wise viscount to bring his court suit along with him!

It was evening and he bore news of a great fete in the palace and palace gardens, to which all true officers and gentlemen were invited. At this Red Harding, who was something of a blade at heart, pulled a long face.

"By the devils, viscount, can I go in these boots?" he gasped.

The troopers at the door fell to laughing at this. The lieutenant froze them with a stare, and then he went in to supper. But as feasting would be going on at the palace we did not spend much time over the tavern beef.

I had two men in to rub us up—boots, breastplates and spurs—and Red Harding groaned, "If we can't go looking like the viscount, we will go looking very much like the devil."

On our way up the hill, which was paved with marble for foot passengers, Harry took an arm of each and said, "The king has ordered me to stay with him and use my poor brains in his counsels while the trouble lasts and you to take the men and out and use your good swords against the Bohemians."

We saluted. Then Red Harding said, "It is good news, viscount, but it will

be strange without you riding and cutting between us."

"True!" I cried; then, "Thank God, I have more blade than brains!"

When we reached the gardens, my rustic eyes were near to popping out at sight of all the lights and gay costumes. We passed into a magnificent hall, and while I was staring about Harry plucked me by the sleeve. There was a tall, ruddy man at his elbow, smiling broadly.

"The king!" whispered Harry. I dropped on one knee, flapping hat in hand.

"Arise, sir," he said, and, when I was up, "I have heard much of you from the viscount here."

Then he said some kind words to Red Harding and let us go. We followed Harry through the brilliant throng like hound pups after their dam in a new cover.

After parading up three great rooms Harry halted us in front of a young woman in figure much like Marion, but with brown hair and the most roguish green eyes I had ever seen. She was talking with a tall cavalier in red and gray, but looked up with a faint run of color over her brow on our approach.

I nudged Harry, who nodded.

"Ho, ho!" thought I. "So this is our lady of the coach window—our future baroness."

Harry presented us and then excused himself, and with the grizzled lieutenant on his arm, left me alternately grinning at the lady and glaring at the cavalier, who almost immediately bowed and went also. Then the Lady St. Armand moved over and bade me rest on the same seat.

In spite of my sword play, my pride and my great talk of the rights of the cadet (which same, in truth, are no rights at all), I was little more than an unpolished rustic, and this honor nearly threw me into a fit. Marion had never asked me to sit beside her on the south terrace. But the lady was so kind and fascinating, like a rare, bright jewel, that I soon found myself at ease.

Now I will get even with Harry and burn his ships behind him, I thought; so I told her of his little story, which had been interrupted by the raid of the bill men.

"So the viscount kisses and tells!" she said, raising her eyebrows.

"Not always," I answered. "I once saw him kiss my mother's maid, but he didn't tell us about it afterward."

She looked at me gayly. I could see at once that she was painfully sharp of wit.

"You shock me, Sir Cadet," she cried in a feigned voice.

"It shocked me, too, at the time, for the same maid would never let me kiss her," I said.

She looked demurely at her pointed shoes.

"What a strange choice," she murmured, "to let the Viscount Isstens kiss her when the cadet of the same name was within calling!"

I knew that she was playing with her meaning here and that she intended



I dropped on one knee, flapping hat in hand.

I should know it. So I smiled simply and remarked that she would make Isstens a very merry old place. At this she blushed, stared haughtily and waved me off, and upon seeing Harry coming toward us I backed away.

Later, when Red Harding and I were stamping about the gardens, Harry came out and pressed my hands.

"Thanks, brother," he whispered. "I think we are quits now." Then he laughed merrily, as if his heart had nothing more to say, and left us.

The old lieutenant scratched his scarred cheek. "Alack!" he cried. "The viscount and the cadet have ogled the ladies and been ogled most lovingly in return, and the Cavalier Red Harding has not won so much as a smile."

"It is safer so, comrade," I replied, "for a youth is in danger of losing his head before the smiles of women."

Shortly after midnight we left the gay throng, for we looked to be well on the road with our men before sunrise of the morrow.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE CAPTURE OF THE STRANGE LADY.

The horses were saddled by lantern light, and we were all mounted before the dawn. At the city gates we joined

three other gentlemen, each leading ten horsemen. So together we made a stout little squad of 42 men and five officers. Our orders were to ride until we met Baron Vossogoff, who was expecting at any hour an attack from the second Bohemian army. The roads were better than the ones we had traveled before; so we pounded along right merrily. A few miles out we passed a regiment of pikemen with their officers mounted on shaggy ponies. They cheered as we rode by in the ditch. Before noon we came upon the army, which lay along the crest of three low hills, awaiting the Bohemians.

After reporting to the baron we stationed our men in a goat pasture and ordered the preparation of dinner. The three officers of the private companies we had ridden along with came to our

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fire. Two of them belonged to great houses in the west and the third was a lowly born, well tested soldier like Red Harding. While we devoured our Spartan fare and told of past adventures we watched company after company of horse, foot and artillery creep along the road and take up position to right and left. We were down a little from the main body of the army, with a thicket of birches in front of us, but presently came noise of a disturbance and rumor that our scouts and out pickets were riding in, many of them wounded. Then the bugles began all along the line, fiercest on the hill to our left, where most of the cannon were planted.

Red Harding filled a flagon with wine to the brim and got to his feet.

"My lords, as the oldest officer in our circle, with most scars on my body, I pledge the war cup. To our country and our king! To the glory of the houses we serve and to ourselves!" he shouted, and, tipping the cup, drained it.

Nothing about "To the glory of God and the saints," which is but a poor excuse for blowing out men's brains and cutting off their heads; but we lifted our swords and swore to fight like loyal men, and the troopers cheered.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

## A Virginia Mother

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