

Leatherface:

A Tale of Old Flanders

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PROLOGUE: MONS, SEPTEMBER, 1572

PROLOGUE

MONS: SEPTEMBER, 1572

It lacked two hours before the dawn on this sultry night early in September. The crescent moon had long ago sunk behind a bank of clouds in the west, and not a sound stirred the low-lying land around the besieged city.

To the south the bivouac fires of Alva's camp had died out one by one, and here the measured tread of the sentinels on their beat alone broke the silence of the night. To the north, where valorous Orange with a handful of men--undisciplined, unpaid and rebellious--vainly tried to provoke his powerful foe into a pitched battle, relying on God for the result, there was greater silence still. The sentinels--wearied and indifferent--had dropped to sleep at their post: the troops, already mutinous, only held to their duty by the powerful personality of the Prince, slept as soundly as total indifference to the cause for which they were paid to fight could possibly allow.

In his tent even Orange--tired out with ceaseless watching--had gone to rest. His guards were in a profound sleep.

Then it was that from the south there came a stir, and from Alva's entrenchments waves of something alive that breathed in the

darkness of the night were set in motion, like when the sea rolls inwards to the shore.

Whispered words set this living mass on its way, and anon it was crawling along--swiftly and silently--more silently than incoming waves on a flat shore--on and on, always northwards in the direction of the Prince of Orange's camp, like some gigantic snake that creeps with belly close to the ground.

"Don Ramon," whispered a voice in the darkness, "let Captain Romero deal with the sentinels and lead the surprise attack, whilst you yourself make straight for the Prince's tent; overpower his guard first, then seize his person. Two hundred ducats will be your reward, remember, if you bring Orange back here--a prisoner--and a ducat for each of your men."

These were the orders and don Ramon de Linea sped forward with six hundred arquebusiers--all picked men--they wore their shirts over their armour, so that in the *mêlée* which was to come they might recognise one another in the gloom.

Less than a league of flat pasture land lay between Alva's entrenchments at St. Florian near the gates of beleaguered Mons, and Orange's camp at Hermigny. But at St. Florian men stirred and planned and threatened, whilst at Hermigny even the sentinels slept. Noble-hearted Orange had raised the standard of revolt against the most execrable oppression of an entire people which the world has ever known--and he could not get more than a handful of patriots to fight for their own freedom against the tyranny and the might of Spain, whilst mercenary troops were left to guard the precious life of the indomitable champion of religious and civil liberties.

The moving mass of de Linea's arquebusiers had covered half a league of the intervening ground; their white shirts only just distinguishable in the gloom made them look like ghosts; only another half-league--less perhaps--separated them from their goal, and still no one stirred in Orange's camp. Then it was that something roused the sentinels from their sleep. A rough hand shook first one then the others by the shoulder, and out of the gloom a peremptory voice whispered hurriedly:

"Quick! awake! sound the alarm! An *encamisada* is upon you. You will all be murdered in your sleep."

And even before the drowsy sentinels had time to rouse themselves or to rub their eyes, the same rough hand had shaken the Prince's guard, the same peremptory voice had called: "Awake! the Spaniards are upon you!"

In the Prince's tent a faint light was glimmering. He himself was lying fully dressed and armed upon a couch. At sound of the voice, of his guards stirring, of the noise and bustle of a wakening camp, he sat up just in time to see a tall figure in the entrance of his tent.

The feeble light threw but into a dim relief this tall figure of a man, clad in dark, shapeless woollen clothes wearing a hood of the same dark stuff over his head and a leather mask over his face.

"Leatherface!" exclaimed the Prince as he jumped to his feet. "What is it?"

"A night attack," replied a muffled voice behind the mask. "Six hundred arquebusiers--they are but half a league away!--I would have been here sooner only the night is so infernally dark, I caught my foot in a rabbit-hole and nearly broke my ankle--I am as lame

as a Jew's horse ... but still in time," he added as he hastily helped the Prince to adjust his armour and straighten out his clothes.

The camp was alive now with call to arms and rattle of steel, horses snorting and words of command flying to and fro. Don Ramon de Linea, a quarter of a league away, heard these signs of troops well on the alert and he knew that the surprise attack had failed. Six hundred arquebusiers--though they be picked men--were not sufficient for a formal attack on the Prince of Orange's entire cavalry. Even mercenary and undisciplined troops will fight valiantly when their lives depend upon their valour. De Linea thought it best to give the order to return to camp.

And the waves of living men which had been set in motion an hour ago, now swiftly and silently went back the way they came. Don Ramon when he came once more in the camp at St. Florian and in the presence of Alva's captain-in-chief, had to report the failure of the night attack which had been so admirably planned.

"The whole camp at Hermigny was astir," he said as he chawed the ends of his heavy moustache, for he was sorely disappointed. "I could not risk an attack under those conditions. Our only chance of winning was by surprise."

"Who gave the alarm?" queried don Frederic de Toledo, who took no pains to smother the curses that rose to his lips.

"The devil, I suppose," growled don Ramon de Linea savagely.

And out at Hermigny--in Orange's tent--the man who was called Leatherface was preparing to go as quietly and mysteriously as he had come.

"They won't be on you, Monseigneur," he said, "now that they know your troops are astir. But if I were you," he added grimly, "I would have every one of those sentinels shot at dawn. They were all of them fast asleep when I arrived."

He gave the military salute and would have turned to go without another word but that the Prince caught him peremptorily by the arm:

"In the meanwhile, Messire, how shall I thank you again?" he asked.

"By guarding your precious life, Monseigneur," replied the man simply. "The cause of freedom in the Low Countries would never survive your loss."

"Well!" retorted the Prince of Orange with a winning smile, "if that be so, then the cause of our freedom owes as much to you as it does to me. Is it the tenth time--or the twelfth--that you have saved my life?"

"Since you will not let me fight with you..."

"I'll let you do anything you wish, Messire, for you would be as fine a soldier as you are a loyal friend. But are you not content with the splendid services which you are rendering to us now? Putting aside mine own life--which mayhap is not worthless--how many times has your warning saved mine and my brother's troops from surprise attacks? How many times have Noircarmes' or don Frederic's urgent appeals for reinforcements failed, through your intervention, to reach the Duke of Alva until our own troops were able to rally? Ah, Messire, believe me! God Himself has chosen you for this work!"

"The work of a spy, Monseigneur," said the other not without a touch of bitterness.

"Nay! if you call yourself a spy, Messire, then shall the name of 'spy' be henceforth a name of glory to its wearer, synonymous with the loftiest patriotism and noblest self-sacrifice."

He held out his hand to the man with the mask, who bent his tall figure over it in dutiful respect.

"You see how well I keep to my share of the compact, Messire. Never once--even whilst we were alone--hath your name escaped my lips."

"For which act of graciousness, Monseigneur, I do offer you my humble thanks. May God guard your Highness through every peril! The cause of justice and of liberty rests in your hands."

After another deeply respectful bow he finally turned to go. He had reached the entrance of the tent when once more the Prince spoke to him.

"When shall I see you again--Leatherface?" he asked cheerily.

"When your Highness' precious life or the safety of your army are in danger," replied the man.

"God reward you!" murmured Orange fervently as the man with the mask disappeared into the night.

BOOK ONE: BRUSSELS

CHAPTER I

THE BLOOD COUNCIL

I

Less than a month later, and tyranny is once more triumphant. Mons has capitulated, Orange has withdrawn his handful of mutinous troops into Holland, Valenciennes has been destroyed and Mechlin--beautiful, gracious, august Mechlin--with her cathedrals and her trade-halls, her ancient monuments of art and civilisation has been given over for three days to the lust and rapine of Spanish soldiery!

Three whole days! E'en now we think on those days and shudder--shudder at what we know, at what the chroniclers have told us, the sacking of churches, the pillaging of monasteries, the massacre of peaceful, harmless citizens!

Three whole days during which the worst demons that infest hell itself, the worst demons that inspire the hideous passions of men--greed, revenge and cruelty--were let loose upon the stately city whose sole offence had been that she had for twenty-four hours harboured Orange and his troops within her gates and closed them against the tyrant's soldiery!

Less than a month and Orange is a fugitive, and all the bright hopes for the cause of religious and civil freedom are once more dashed to the ground. It seems as if God Himself hath set His face against the holy cause! Mons has fallen and Mechlin is reduced to ashes, and over across the borders the King of France has caused ten thousand of his subjects to be massacred--one holy day, the feast of St. Bartholomew--ten thousand of them!--just because their religious beliefs did not coincide with his own. The appalling news drove Orange and his small army to flight--he had reckoned on help from the King of France--instead of that promised help the news of the massacre of ten thousand Protestants! Catholic Europe was horror-stricken at the crime committed in the name of religion; but in the Low Countries, Spanish tyranny had scored a victory--the ignoble Duke of Alva triumphed and the cause of freedom in Flanders and Hainault and Brabant received a blow from which it did not again recover for over three hundred years!

II

Outwardly the house where the Duke of Alva lodged in Brussels was not different to many of the same size in the city. It was built of red brick with stone base and finely-carved cornice, and had a high slate roof with picturesque dormer windows therein. The windows on the street level were solidly grilled and were ornamented with richly-carved pediments, as was the massive doorway too. The door itself was of heavy oak, and above it there was a beautifully wrought niche which held a statue of the Virgin.

On the whole it looked a well-constructed, solid and roomy house, and Mme. de Jassy, its owner, had placed it at the disposal of the

Lieutenant-Governor when first he arrived in Brussels, and he had occupied it ever since. The idler as he strolled past the house would hardly pause to look at it, if he did not happen to know that behind those brick walls and grilled windows a work of oppression more heinous than this world had ever known before, was being planned and carried on by a set of cruel and execrable tyrants against an independent country and a freedom-loving people.

Here in the dining-hall the Duke of Alva would preside at the meetings of the Grand Council--the Council of Blood--sitting in a high-backed chair which had the arms of Spain emblazoned upon it. Juan de Vargas and Alberic del Rio usually sat to right and left of him. Del Rio--indolent and yielding--a mere tool for the carrying out of every outrage, every infamy which the fiendish brain of those tyrants could devise wherewith to crush the indomitable spirit of a proud nation jealous of its honour and of its liberties: and de Vargas--Alva's double and worthy lieutenant--no tool he, but a terrible reality, active and resourceful in the invention of new forms of tyranny, new fetters for the curbing of stiff-necked Flemish and Dutch burghers, new methods for wringing rivers of gold out of a living stream of tears and blood.

De Vargas!--the very name stinks in the nostrils of honest men even after the lapse of centuries!--It conjures up the hideous image of a human bloodhound--lean and sallow of visage, with drooping, heavy-lidded eyes and flaccid mouth, a mouth that sneered and jested when men, women and children were tortured and butchered, eyes that gloated at sight of stake and scaffold and gibbet--and within the inner man, a mind intent on the science of murder and rapine and bloodshed.

Alva the will that commanded! Vargas the brain that devised! Del Rio the hand that accomplished!

Men sent by Philip II. of Spain, the most fanatical tyrant the world has ever known, to establish the abhorrent methods of the Spanish Inquisition in the Low Countries in order to consolidate Spanish rule there and wrest from prosperous Flanders and Brabant and Hainault, from Holland and the Dutch provinces enough gold to irrigate the thirsty soil of Spain. "The river of gold which will flow from the Netherlands to Madrid shall be a yard deep!" so had Alva boasted when his infamous master sent him to quell the revolt which had noble-hearted Orange for its leader--a revolt born of righteous indignation and an unconquerable love of freedom and of justice.

To mould the Netherlands into abject vassals of Spain, to break their independence of spirit by terrorism and by outrage, to force Spanish ideas, Spanish culture, Spanish manners, Spanish religion upon these people of the North who loathed tyranny and worshipped their ancient charters and privileges, that was the task which the Duke of Alva set himself to do--a task for which he needed the help of men as tyrannical and unscrupulous as himself.

Granvelle had begun the work, Alva was completing it! The stake, the scaffold, the gibbet for all who had one thought of justice, one desire for freedom. Mons razed to the ground, Valenciennes a heap of ruins and ashes, Mechlin a hecatomb. Men, women and children outraged and murdered! Whole families put to the torture to wring gold from unwilling givers! churches destroyed! monasteries ransacked!

That was the work of the Grand Council--the odious Council of Blood, the members of which have put to shame the very name of religion, for they dared to pretend that they acted in its name.

Alva! de Vargas! del Rio! A trinity of fiends whose deeds would shame the demons in hell! But there were others too, and, O ye gods! were they not infinitely more vile, since their hands reeked with the blood of their own kith and kin? Alva and his two bloodhounds were strangers in a strange land, owing allegiance to Spain alone--but Councillor Hessels sat on this same infamous board, and he was a patrician of Brabant. And there was Pierre Arsens, president of Artois, there was de Berlaymont and Viglius and Hopper--gentlemen (save the mark!) and burghers of Flanders or Hainault or the Dutch provinces!--and who can name such creatures without a shudder of loathing?

III

As for don Ramon de Linea, he was just the usual type of Spanish soldier--a grandee of Spain, direct descendant of the Cid, so he averred, yet disdained to prove it. For in him there was no sense of chivalry--just personal bravery and no more--the same kind of bravery you would meet in a tiger or a jaguar. In truth there was much in common between don Ramon and the wild feline tribes that devastate the deserts: he had the sinuous movements, the languorous gestures of those creatures, and his eyes--dark and velvety at times, at others almost of an orange tint--had all the cruel glitter which comes into the eyes of the leopard when he is out to kill. Otherwise don Ramon was a fine-looking man, dark-

skinned and dark-eyed, a son of the South, with all those cajoling ways about him which please and so often deceive the women.

He it was who had been in command at Mechlin--entrusted by General de Noircarmes with the hideous task of destroying the stately city--and he had done it with a will. Overproud of his achievements he had obtained leave to make personal report of them to the Lieutenant-Governor, and thus it was that on this 2nd day of October, 1572, he was present at the council board, talking with easy grace and no little satisfaction of all that he had done: of the churches which he had razed to the ground, the houses which he had sacked, of the men, women and children whom he had turned out naked and starving into the streets.

"We laboured hard for three days," he said, "and the troops worked with a will, for there were heavy arrears of pay due to them and we told them to make up those arrears in Mechlin, since they wouldn't get any money from headquarters. Oh! Mechlin got all that she deserved! Her accursed citizens can now repent at leisure of their haste in harbouring Orange and his rebel troops!"

His voice was deep and mellow and even the guttural Spanish consonants sounded quite soft when he spoke them. Through half-closed lids his glance swept from time to time over the eager faces around the board, and his slender hands emphasised the hideous narrative with a few graceful gestures. He looked just the true type of grand seigneur telling a tale of mild adventure and of sport, and now and then he laughed displaying his teeth, sharp and white like the fangs of a leopard's cub.

No one interrupted him, and Councillor Hessels fell gradually--as was his wont--into a gentle doze from which he roused himself

now and again in order to murmur drowsily: "To the gallows with them all!"

Viglius and Hopper and de Berlaymont tried hard to repress a shudder. They were slaves of Spain, these gentlemen of the Low Countries, but not Spanish born, and were not accustomed from earliest childhood to listen--not only unmoved but with a certain measure of delight--to these tales of horror. But there was nothing in what don Ramon said of which they disapproved. They were--all of them--loyal subjects of the King, and the very thought of rebellion was abhorrent to them.

But it was passing strange that the Duke of Alva made no comment on the young captain's report. There he sat, at the head of the table, silent and moody, with one bony fist clenched above a letter which lay open beneath his hand, and which bore a large red seal with the royal arms of Spain impressed upon it. Not a word of praise or blame did he speak. His heavy brows were contracted in a sullen frown, and his protruding eyes were veiled beneath the drooping lids.

De Vargas, too, was silent--de Vargas who loved to gloat over such tales as don Ramon had to tell, de Vargas who believed that these rebellious Low Countries could only be brought into subjection by such acts of demoniacal outrage as the Spanish soldiery had just perpetrated in Mons and in Mechlin. He, too, appeared moody to-day, and the story of sick women and young children being dragged out of their beds and driven out to perish in the streets while their homes were being pillaged and devastated, left him taciturn and unmoved.

Don Ramon made vain pretence not to notice the Lieutenant-Governor's moodiness, nor yet de Vargas' silence, but those who knew him best--and de Vargas was among these--plainly saw that irritation had seized upon his nerves. He was talking more volubly, and his voice had lost its smoothness, whilst the languor of his gestures had given place to sharp, febrile movements of hands and shoulders which he tried vainly to disguise.

"Our soldiers," he was saying loudly, "did not leave a loaf of bread in the bakeries, or a bushel of wheat in the stores of Mechlin. The rich citizens we hanged at the rate of twenty a day, and I drew orders for the confiscation of their estates to the benefit of our Most Gracious King and suzerain Lord. I tell you we made quick work of all the rebels: stone no longer stands on stone in Mechlin to-day: its patricians are beggars, its citizens are scattered. We have put to the torture and burned at the stake those who refused to give us their all. A month ago Mechlin was a prosperous city: she gave of her wealth and of her hospitality to the rebel troops of Orange. To-day she and her children have ceased to be. Are you not satisfied?"

He brought his clenched fist crashing down upon the table: surely a very unusual loss of restraint in a grandee of Spain: but obviously he found it more and more difficult to keep his temper under control, and those dark eyes of his were now fixed with a kind of fierce resentment upon the impassive face of the Duke.

Councillor Hessels, only half awake, reiterated with drowsy emphasis: "To the gallows with them! Send them all to the gallows!"

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