THE HOUSE OF ISSTENS.

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

MADE INTO A ROMANCE BY THEODORE ROBERTS.

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CHAPTER I.

THE TALL ROBBER AT ISSTENS.

For a few seconds I was totally at a loss to know why I was sitting in the ditch with torn garments and bloody hands. Then I remembered the skirmish with the robbers, the hot chase and the stumble. That had all happened by starlight. It was bright morning now.

The ditch in which I found myself was one my father's men had finished digging a few days before to drain off the great swamp of Isstens. There was enough water in the bottom of it to make the seat of my riding breeches decidedly damp and to completely cool my spleen. I crawled stiffly out into the grass, and there to my vast satisfaction found my sword. I took it up, wiped the innocent moisture of dew from the blade and turned to my left toward the great house of Isstens.

It was here in the same house and courts that my ancestors had lived since the very beginning of the kingdom of Wassmark.

All the land, meadow and swamp, rock and forest, to the amount of ten square miles, had been given to one Clare the Isstens by the first king of the country. The word Isstens, a learned doctor once told me, stood in some crazy and forgotten language for sworder or swordsman.

Clare the Isstens, with rock from his own quarries, built the house, and from that day to this whereon I write his descendants have lived in it.

I broke through a shaggy hedge of fir and went up the wide avenue of beeches. Passing a great gate, all ribbed with iron and pierced with musket holes, I entered the courtyard. The main door of the house stood before me ten paces with three shields above it.

The oldest and least skillfully executed of these shields bore a long unwieldly sword and underneath strange letters and marks partly obliterated by rain and sun. The next, which was larger than either of the others and only two centuries old, bore a coat of eight quarterings with the old two handed sword for crest set up on my parents' wedding day. Its gold was hardly tarnished, and its gules and azure blazed bravely. It bore the arms of my mother's family, the great D'Artagans of Normandy.

Can you wonder that Harry, my elder brother, and I were as proud as the very devil?

But I have given the slip to my story, telling all the arms and family history with too much of my native pride. Pardon; I am not yet old enough to be modest.

Upon entering the dining hall I found Harry, Viscount Isstens, in my father's great chair with his head swathed in bandages.

"Hello, Dart!" he cried, speaking as well as he could through the rags. "Half the household is out hunting for you."

I embraced him and sat down to a meat pie that invited me from the table.

"Where have you been, old hothead?" asked Harry.

"I spent the night in the ditch and got out of it about 12 minutes ago," I answered, hunting about for a decanter.

He laughed as loudly as he could considering his headgear.

"You made a longer run than I did, and it is a pity you did not catch your man. Fact is"—he sighed and rubbed his head—"one of the rascals clubbed me in the avenue."

I am not a man to talk much when I am hungry, but I paused with the wineglass half way to my lips and asked what the clubbing amounted to. "Nothing but a swollen head and a loose tooth," he answered.

There was silence after that until I pushed my plate away and shoved back my chair.

"We will go out and see the prisoner now; he is down in the cellar," said my brother. I noticed my sword, and as I always like to have it in my room I put it under my arm, so that I might take it up with me after inspecting the captured robber. As we went along Harry talked about the fight. He told how our father had run one of them through behind the stables; how old Pierre had shot another; he wounded one, and Paul and Red Harding caught their leader.

"And the three you went after got away," he said. I grinned soberly at this. "Two of them are bagged sure enough, my Lord Harry," I answered. "The first is in the end of the great ditch, with a sword cut to sleep with, and the second got in the way of a pistol ball at the end of the patch they are plowing up in the swamp."

Harry clapped me on my mud stained back. "You old fire eating cadet!" he cried, his gray eyes dancing. We felt very well satisfied with ourselves, for these robbers were one of the cruelest and boldest bands in the northern mountains, but when we arrived at that part of the cellar in which the prisoner had been bound our joy turned to chagrin. The man had gone—clean as a gray wolf out of a pit.

"Dart, this is a frightful mess we are in," muttered the viscount, "for as sure as death he will have his whole tribe on us hot foot."

"Perhaps he is still near," I ventured. "Let us hunt for him. I will stay here while you get your sword and pistols."

He was used to being treated in this manner, and with a grunt sped off to arm himself. He had hardly left the cellar when the tallest man I ever saw leaped at me over a bundle of fagots. I gave way sharply, for a boy of 20 years is not as cool as a soldier of 20 fights. He cut at me with a club made from one of our own fagots. I ducked my head, slipped and sprawled forward between his legs, at the same time dropping my rapier. The robber tried to spring away toward the passage leading to the courtyard, but I caught his ankle and held on. Down he came on top of me with all his weight.

Things looked very bad for the sprightly D'Artagan of Isstens. But as he stared at me as if not knowing what to do, Harry returned and smote him across the poll with the butt of a pistol. Giving vent to a bull-like roar, the tall man arose, knocked Harry spinning with his fist and escaped into the courtyard.

CHAPTER II.

THE NIGHT ATTACK.

What a rumpus there was when Baron Isstens, the baroness and the servants returned and found us shaken and bloody and the prisoner escaped! Our mother had hysterics before she had done with kissing me, but our father swore a big oath and rushed out to order "boot and saddle." The gaping menservants followed him, and Harry started up.

"My boy, you cannot go!" cried our beautiful mother, her face stained with blood from his bruised lips.

"I have to go, lady mother. I am not hurt," he answered over his shoulder as he ran from the room.

I buckled on my sword belt and clashed home my good blade. "You too?" she moaned. But there was a flash of pride in her eyes that we were both true sons.

"I must, mother, to look after our gentlemen of title, to see that they come to no harm," I laughingly replied. Then I bent (I went a little over six feet even at that age) and kissed the pale upturned face. In another minute I was climbing into the saddle and straightening my pistol holsters.

Six of us clattered out and down the long avenue. The afternoon was well begun and the air was warm. We saw two of our men carrying a body out of the ditch. It was the robber I had run through on the previous night. We could see a gleam of red sash and metal belt where another lay on the fresh turned furrows. Spreading out into the fields that bordered the road we beat every cover, but no giant mountaineer could we find.

Harry, because of the beat, had pulled the bandages from his face, leaving the blue lump on his forehead and the swollen jaw exposed to view.

When the dusk of evening and the chill mist from the swamp had overtaken us—and not until then did my father order a return—we wheeled silently on the wide road and cantered back toward the house of Isstens.

"We will break up their nest, Dart, boy, as soon as the crops are in," said my father, laying his hand on my knee as we swung along.

"I only want the chance to charge into them," I answered, "but the peasants say that they are many and well armed."

"Yes, and every man of them has innocent blood on his hands and is an outlaw from his country, whatever land that may be, for they come from everywhere, but we are true subjects of our king and noblemen of Wassmark. I think if we call in the foresters we will break them."

He put out his other hand and pressed Harry's shoulder.

Little things like this meant much from the Baron Isstens.

When we gained the courtyard, they were awaiting us anxiously with lanterns and candles. In the hall our mother unbuckled our sword belts. First her husband's, then Harry's, then mine. It was queer to see her pull loose the great buckles and drag the clanging scabbards aside. She was smiling all the while with the joy of our return, and the father stood with a broad grin on his shaven lips, and his eyes following every move she made.

That night we had supper in the little tapestried parlor off the dining hall. There were six of us around the table. My mother sat at the tea urn (rather an uncommon piece of table plate in those days) and my father at the round of beef at the other end. Mistress Sarah Lyons, the widow of an English officer who had been slain in Wassmark, and my mother's right hand in all housekeeping matters, sat beside Harry, and opposite them scarred old Lieutenant Red Harding and your humble cadet. Red Harding was a peasant by birth, but had done such good service as a soldier to the house of Isstens that he had long ago been dubbed gentleman and treated as one.

Though a raid from the mountain outlaws hung over us, we formed a merry party, the baron drawing out Red Harding to tell stories of the woods and people, and the baroness saying all manner of witty things. Mistress Lyons told us tales of England, from which we gathered that the people there are very strong and brave, eat as much as is good for them, drink like Germans and go to church regularly.

We could hear now and then a shout of laughter or a burst of song from the men in the outer hall. Foresters and keepers, shepherds and plowmen had been called in to form a garrison.

We did not tarry over the fire after supper, but retired to our chambers. Harry and I slept in a turret room that overlooked the rear walls and a wide field lying ready for the sowing of the grain. Bare and chill it looked under the white stars.

We were tired and sore, but after throwing off our stiff skirted coats, in which it was our habit to sup, and putting aside our lace collars, we sprawled in the window seat and gazed out.

Here and there glimmered the light of a cottage window. Unlike some landholders, the Isstens gave their people cottages instead of huts and kind words instead of kicks. This was much to our advantage, as you will presently see. We had no light in the room, and Harry, who was three years my senior and had been several times at Blatenburg, the king's city, began talking softly of a court lady he had danced with. I thought this mighty fine, and listened with all my ears. He came to

We sprawled in the window seat.

a very touching part. He was saying, "She gave me a little strand of her hair leaning from the coach window, and I kissed her hand three times and swore"—and at that moment we heard a noise that would make the starkest hero swear "like devils." It was the loud roaring of pistols and muskets and the fierce shouts of men.

We took our swords from their scabbards and a pistol in each left hand and fled down the stairs. The men were arming and rushing forth to support the guards, and my father was tearing about in search of his new horse pistols. Upon entering the courtyard we found Red Harding and a handful of men at the great gate and a few stout foresters with boar spears, thrusting the enemy back from the top of the wall where it is lowest.

"At them!" I shouted, and just then the baron passed me with his dags and two handed sword. We three opened fire on the black heads bobbing over the wall, and then turned to see how things were shaping. The noise of bellowing men and crashing guns was fearful.

"I am glad we have a garrison,' said Harry, "and lots of half pikes and boar spears for the plowmen."

I did not answer, for at that moment the great gate was smashed in and a body of burly ruffians plunged through. Without turning to look at them, Red Harding and his men cut and thrust at the ones trying to follow, so wrathfully that they gave way, and up went the oak again with a mighty grindstone and a keg of iron bolts to hold it. Eight fellows had entered, however, and these fought with a dash and fierceness like mountain wolves at bay—with a very good chance for life, too, for our garrison could not spare its numbers from the gates and walls.

Harry raised the family warcry: "The Long sword! The long sword!" and followed by me and a half dozen old retainers rushed at them. There was no loading of pieces in that tussle. It was cut and thrust, dodge and strike, give and take, with hissing breath and muffled curses. I have never been more proud of my brother than I was then. Though pale of face, like a bookman, and more given to writing ballads than bouts with single sticks, he played his lithe rapier blade against their swords and pikes like white lightning. For awhile we stood abreast with our men on either side. The invaders marked our fine linen shirts and powdered hair and yelled: "Down with the fine gentlemen! Down with the fat landholders!" By this hoping to win our peasants.

"And, thank God, they held the land!" cried an old herder.

I got my point into a fellow, dropping him so that the next could get at me. By the saints, the man who took his place was the giant of the cellar. He carried a rapier, and with it in his grip wore the air of a man of breeding. We worked back from the others, we two. He fenced like a master, but happily for me he had been pricked slightly in the right shoulder.

"I have the honor of crossing swords with D'Artagan, cadet of Isstens?" he asked.

"The same," I grunted, parrying a thrust in quarte.

I backed slowly. He was certainly my master in skill.

Presently I gained a little. "The chief of robbers, I believe?" I queried with fine scorn.

"Sir Cadet, you are very young and very proud," he said quietly. "I was once a very devil at counting quarterings and riding to hounds myself."

I was filled with surprise at the tone of his voice more than at what he said, for any base born fool can lie about his breeding.

My wrist was tiring when I saw with relief that the members of the attacking party inside the walls were all killed or captured.

"Pray surrender, sir; your men are down," I panted.

He lowered the point of his sword. "I surrender to as brave a gentleman, sir, as ever clapped hand to hilt," and bowing like a dancing master he presented his rapier. Harry and his men came running toward us.

"This is my prisoner," I cried through the clatter and din, "and the man that harms him answers the sword of the cadet."

The men turned off to help at the gates, and Harry said, "Well done, brother," and followed them.

"Where can I leave you? I must back to the fight," I said hurriedly.

"Though I am a man of honor, I beg you to turn a key on me, for form's sake," he replied.

He seemed to take his capture cheerfully. We entered the house and I introduced him to one of the larders and bolted the door on the outside.

Half an hour later the enemy withdrew, leaving the courtyard a ghastly place of blood, silent bodies and broken bill, and the soft dawn showing under the stars. The baron, covered with blood from wounds on his cheek and shoulder, came into the great hall, where our wounded lay moaning and the others rested. He doffed his hat and in his clear voice cried: "Men, I must thank you from my heart. You have stood tonight where the best trained troops in Europe would falter. May God give to all the king's peers as brave a following as he has to me and my house."

He went through the door to the inner rooms amid the loyal cheers of the garrison, and Harry and I turned to follow him.

"God keep the viscount," cried a big plowman.

"And the cadet," sounded a muffled voice from the larder.

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 prisoned 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 Cæsar, 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 robber 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 frog.

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 lithe 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.

[CONTINUED.]

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