

# THE BURNISHED BLADE

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THE  
BURNISHED  
BLADE

To  
GEORGE L. SCHOONOVER  
my father

**THE  
BURNISHED  
BLADE**

## CHAPTER

### \* 1 \*

TO TRAVELERS destined to die at the hands of bandits, death came silently in fifteenth century France. The weapons of the period did not make a sound.

Almost within hearing distance of the cathedral bells of Rouen, covering the hills that rise abruptly from the river Seine and fall away again toward the fertile plains of Normandy, an ancient forest had stood since Roman times.

Late in the Tuesday night that followed Trinity Sunday—it was the springtime of 1431—when thousands of people were converging on Rouen, a small cavalcade in too much of a hurry to stop at an inn pressed on through the gloomy old trees. A torchbearer picked out the obscure path before them. A noble knight, armed cap-a-pie, rode behind him. Then followed a richly clad lady.

A woman had no business riding abroad at such an hour in such a place. No one but a distraught mother would have insisted on doing so. Then came the men-at-arms, surrounding the mule-borne litter that carried the sick boy.

There was in Rouen a surgeon whose fame had spread beyond Normandy into France. The parents believed that if anyone could, he could cure the intermittent fever that periodically wasted the lad. They had thought they detected the onset of another attack: there would be a day or two of extraordinary good spirits and activity, then nausea, apathy, and burning fever; and then the weeks of slow convalescence. Hence their haste.

The long journey had made them extremely tired. The men-at-arms relaxed their vigilance a little.

Suddenly a metallic snap and a hiss split the air like the spit of an angry cat. The ominous sound was followed by other hisses, and the air filled with crossbow quarrels—missiles so deadly and effective that the Church had repeatedly forbidden their use against Christians.

The knight and his lady died instantly in their saddles.

Whoever was shooting at the little party was well armed and accustomed to weapons. It was banditry to shoot a woman, but banditry was not uncommon. The roving bands of outlaws that infested the forests were constantly decimated by punitive raids organized against them by the nobles and outraged citizens of the towns. But they were as constantly reenforced by deserters from the armies.

Some of the men-at-arms were killed, too. Seeing their lord and lady both slain, the others fled into the forest. Nobody paid any attention to the litter.

The man with the torch had flung it away from him so as not to attract attention to himself and had run away from the scene. The torch continued to blaze smokily in the path. In its uncertain light the attackers, a good-sized group of them, cautiously approached the bodies of their victims. The outlaws worked systematically, as if they were familiar with such details. Every article of clothing was stripped from the bodies. What was useless they piled into a heap. What was valuable they kept. The lady's jewelry, the knight's purse and armor and the weapons of the men-at-arms were loaded on a sumpter mule.

"They are French," the bandit leader said pleasantly. "That is curious, so close to Rouen; and very fortunate for us. No one would expect a French nobleman hereabouts. I don't think we even have to worry too much about the escape of a few of the servants. Undoubtedly they'll scamper back to France." They heaped dry branches on the clothes and burned them. Finally, deeming it prudent to destroy the identity even of French victims, they threw the naked bodies into the fire. Then the bandits disappeared into the forest.

The abandoned mules had upset their litter. The boy saw the gleam of the fire and stumbled toward it. He was terribly frightened and confused. He saw, or thought he saw, his parents without any clothes on, burning. He approached the pyre and tried to drag his mother's body out of the flames, but he burned his hands. He saw that his father's eyes had melted out of their sockets. All his mother's yellow hair had burned away and she was turning black. The boy shrieked and began to run.

He ran at great speed on long legs, to which terror and utter deso-

lation gave wings, following the path that led through the forest and out to the highway that dropped down toward the Seine and Rouen; and he did not stop until a pain in his chest made breathing so difficult that he had to. His fatigue and confusion increased. In a little while it was impossible to go on.

There was a hollow place between a rock and the roots of a great old tree. Into this shelter the boy wedged his tired, trembling body and lay sobbing until, just before dawn, he thought his father and mother came to say good night to him, as they always did, and told him to be a good boy and go to sleep. There was nothing wrong with his father's eyes, and his mother's yellow hair had all grown back again.

## CHAPTER

### ✻ 2 ✻

WHEN THE BOY AWOKE, his head was hot with a fever and the terror returned as if there had been no interval of sleep. Again the urge to run came upon him. He thought he did run. Actually he walked with a stumbling uncertain gait. He was thoroughly wet with the dew that had gathered on him while he slept. His teeth chattered in a chill he did not feel. His hands began to pain terribly.

After a little time the sun dried out his clothes and his teeth stopped chattering. Some strength returned to his legs. The landscape stopped twisting about. He saw that there were many people on the highway, all going in the same direction.

He was midway between two groups. Ahead of him on a richly draped litter slung between two horses was an old man with a haughty face. He was speaking English to a younger man in a short jacket. From time to time the younger man nodded his head respectfully to the old gentleman, while his nimble legs in their tight hose executed as close an approximation of a genuflection as could be accomplished if he were to continue to keep up with the litter. When he did this, the incredibly long points of his soft leather shoes licked up little whirlpools of dust in the road. Around the litter rode knights in new armor, and both before and behind were archers with long English bows. That the old man in the litter was a great lord bent on a mission of importance was apparent even to the boy, who knew that men were seldom carried in litters like women and sick children.

A group of friars, dusty as from a long journey, was directly behind the boy. One who walked a little apart from the rest and whom they appeared to be following glanced casually at him. With the

instinct that some dogs and most children have for manifest kindliness, the boy approached a little unsteadily and very respectfully.

"I am going to Rouen, Father," he said, falling into a walk and looking up at the man.

The priest nodded, but did not speak.

"I am hungry, Father."

The priest nodded again. People were always hungry, and everyone was going to Rouen.

"My father and mother were slain and burned last night." It was almost a question, as if the too bright-eyed boy doubted the terrible words he was pronouncing.

The priest started and looked down at him sharply. The solemnity of the day struck him with an intensity that seemed to have grown with every hour since he and his group had left the cloister during the night, to be present in Rouen where they would make a retreat in the cathedral, offering their thankful prayers for a judgment of the ecclesiastical court which rejoiced their hearts; the commutation of the sentence of the Maid of Orleans to life imprisonment. She had put off her man's garments, recanted her errors, prayed mercy of the court and received it. It is always good to give thanks when mercy is shown, as it always is shown, the priest assured himself, by Holy Mother Church; and, moreover, the Maid was French. Now, however, since dawn, rumor had spread from group to group along the road, swiftly, like pain traveling from the extremities to the heart, that the Maid had recanted her recantation and put on her sinful garb again, and that the original judgment of burning had been reaffirmed, to be put into execution forthwith. If this boy were jesting . . .

"You're not an English lad? Nay, I perceive by your speech that you're not. Perhaps you are telling the truth. What is your name?"

"Pierre."

"Pierre what?"

"Just Pierre."

"How old are you?"

"I do not know, Father."

"How many times have you observed the feast day of your patron, St. Pierre?"

The boy shook his head.

It was not uncommon for children not to know their own age, especially among the peasantry. The boy who called himself Pierre was big enough to be ten, but he spoke like a much younger child. The good,

but undistinguished clothing he wore might have belonged to almost any class of person, and it was torn and dirty from his night in the open.

"I am telling the truth," he said.

"No doubt, no doubt. You've the stigmata on the hands to prove it. Who murdered your parents, you poor boy?"

Pierre shook his head.

"Nay, how could you know! You don't even know your own name or how old you are. Where do you live, lad? In Rouen?"

"No."

"Do you live in a city? Are there walls where you live?"

"There are walls."

The priest pondered. There were walls around all cities and all castles. Even the huts of peasants sometimes stood within manorial walls.

"You have made me talk too much, boy," he said severely. "Since dawn my brothers and I have bound ourselves to preserve silence and the custody of the eyes—why I looked at you I do not know—and not to eat at all this sad day. And part of my vow, by my own fault, I have already broken for you. May I be forgiven, and I think I may, for here I can do a good work."

"I do not understand you, Father."

"Probably not. Did you say that you were hungry?"

"Yes, I did."

"It wouldn't hurt you to fast this day, of all days. But your stomach is young, and you've suffered a great loss, and no doubt you'll fast aplenty in the future. Look you, lad; I am only a poor priest, devoted to Our Lady and St. Augustine. Already I have broken a vow for you, and my mind is troubled whether 'twas an angel or the Devil that prompted me to do it." He glanced apprehensively back over his shoulder at the company of splendidly dressed knights that followed his own little group.

"Directly behind us—do not appear to look now—is the great Baron de Retz and his retinue. The baron is the tall young man on the white horse. He is a marshal of France and a brave cavalier. South of the Loire he lives in greater splendor than a king. He is reputed to be interested in orphans. Nevertheless, I do not want him to see you. When I cease talking to you, you are to go to the side of the road and pretend to extract a pebble from your shoe."

"Why, Father?"

"Do not ask me why. Probably you will have a pebble in your shoe."

"Yes, Father."

"Above all, you are to avert your eyes so that you cannot see his face, and so that he cannot see yours." Here the priest looked at the youngster with sad, wise eyes. "Do you understand?"

"No, Father, but I shall do as you say. Is there something wrong with my face?"

"There is nothing wrong with your face. That is the trouble."

"I do not understand."

"I do not want you to. I want you to obey me. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, Father."

"After the baron and his men have passed, you will continue to extract the pebble from your shoe until the next group of men arrives."

"Yes, Father," said Pierre, half smiling at the notion that it would take him so long to shake out his shoe. The priest smiled, too, liking his quick apprehension, and continued:

"The short, fat man is an armorer of my acquaintance. He is called Hugh of Milan. The tall man with the dark face and the heathen head-gear is his servant. They are both good Christian men. Tell the armorer that you are sent by Brother Isambert de la Pierre and that he will be doing a good work to take you home and care for you until such time as it may please God, my vows of silence having been renewed and discharged, to allow me the leisure to consult with him—"

Pierre's face was a study in confusion.

"Oh, tell him, lad, just tell him to take you home and feed you. I'll speak to him later. Now go." And he signed the cross over the boy. Pierre hurried to the side of the road. There, a little off the beaten way, averting his face and squatting on the ground amid the wayside vegetation, his head looked like a golden flower on a slender stalk. Dutifully he extracted the pebble which the monk had seen bulging under the soft leather of his shoe.

"He should have worn a hat," sighed Isambart. "Oh, well."

The Baron de Retz looked neither to the right nor to the left. He certainly did not notice the boy. His intense face had an odd look of concentrated indecision. He called for a cup of chilled wine. Instantly a page ran to one of the pack mules, raised the lid of a small traveling chest and drew out a silver goblet that appeared to be frosted with dew. This he presented to his lord, who quaffed it delicately and tossed

back the cup with a gesture. The man caught it deftly, from long practice.

Pierre had never heard of chilling wine, nor had anyone else in France since the Romans. It was one of the baron's oddities. He had many. Nine years later they dug the little skeletons out of the cellars of his castle and hanged him for, among other things, one hundred and forty murders. But this day he was remembering how he had fought with the Maid against the English and wondering how her execution would affect him.

Isambart and his monks were now far down the road. Once again breaking his vow to preserve the custody of the eyes, he shot a quick glance back at Pierre, noted that he was still extracting the pebble, that the baron's cavalcade had entirely passed, and that Hugh of Milan and his men were approaching. He sighed again and addressed a prayer to the Virgin, thanking her for what he had been the means of accomplishing—if indeed it had been anything, for it was not in his heart to believe all the evil spoken against the baron—and then for the boy, and then for the Maid, and then for himself and for strength to do the things that a galloping courier had just announced were to be demanded of him that day.

Ugo, onetime armorer to Filippo Maria, last of the Visconti dukes of Milan, had found himself exiled to France in the year of our Lord 1427. He had been heard to remark that there were handsomer men in the duchy than Filippo Maria, and the unhappy duke, who was spectacularly ugly and very sensitive about it, banished him forthwith. In Rouen, where he had set up shop, he was known simply by the name of Hugh of Milan.

He watched the boy detach himself from the group of monks and run to the side of the road and squat among the bushes, perhaps to relieve himself. The reputation of the Baron de Retz was known to him, and for a moment his agile mind speculated on the possibilities of the situation. But in view of the high drama about to unfold at Rouen, he anticipated no accosting of the boy. His speedy, accurate interpretation of the psychological factors involved was the product of a curious, inquiring intellect. He was interested in the behavior of men, in the nature of plants and animals, and, most of all, in the working of steel, that wonderful metal of his craft. The universities did not teach these things. No one in Christendom had ever wondered about them. Thus

Hugh of Milan, although he did not know it, was in a minor sense one of the first humble prophets of the Renaissance, which, still without a name, was already burgeoning in Italy.

Hugh of Milan considered himself an unfortunate exile in a backward country. His Turkish slave had caused gossip among the townspeople, and his enormous purchases of olive oil at the market, far more than his household could consume, gave rise to all sorts of rumors. But his regular appearance at Mass with his slave, who was soon discovered to be a free man and a Christian, quieted the gossip about his orthodoxy.

The turban, it is true, was thought to be out of place in church, where it troubled the conscience of some of the worshippers. But on discarding it the Turk was discovered to have no ears. His head was bald and covered with scars so deep and horrible that it seemed no man could have lived to recover from the wounds which had caused them. This was even more disquieting than the turban, and he was quickly encouraged to bind up his head again with a rag. But Abdul had worn many folds and layers of cloth on his head for sixty years. He was cold and ill at ease under a mean little bandage. Thus, as time went on and the people got used to it, the covering assumed more and more the shape of his old turban. But the badge and feathers were gone, and so it had no religious significance. It was even pointed out by Isambart that such a headpiece, worn by a baptized and converted Turk, should serve to the faithful as a sign of eventual triumph of true religion over the heathen. That quieted the rumors about Abdul.

Other things troubled Hugh: the barbarous manners of his customers and the poor quality of the bread. Once he had burned a loaf of it in the fire and saved the ashes and leached them with water. There remained an insoluble quantity of pulverized stone. He was too wise to confront the miller with the results of his experiment, for he knew he would be accused of sorcery. So he quietly surmised that a new grindstone which had recently been delivered to the mill, being poorly surfaced had disintegrated at first, to the great disadvantage of the flour. He assumed that the quality would return, to French standards, at least, as soon as the stone wore smooth; in any case, there was nothing he could do about it.

Then, the olive oil was expensive. Often there was water in it, which had to be removed by boiling. Or there were little sticks and bits of bark that had to be filtered out. Sometimes the oil was contaminated

with salt, and this he could never contrive to remove; and since salt ruined the oil for his purposes, he was frequently forced to renew his supply.

Hugh, with his Turkish servant and his two clumsy French apprentices, was returning home after a week spent in the castle of a rich English client who had refused to have his armor repaired in the shop in Rouen. The castle had an inadequate forge and a soft anvil. *Gesù!* Did they expect him to carry his own beautiful casehardened anvil with him on a journey of ten leagues? Well, he almost wished he had done so. The job would have been smoother. But the English lord had paid well, and expressed his satisfaction, especially with the sword. Hugh sniffed contemptuously. Now, if he had been in his own shop with his own equipment around him—ah! there he would have shown him swords to make the English lord's eyes pop out of his head. Hugh carefully explained to Abdul that the sword was good enough for the Englishman. Abdul majestically inclined his head and said that his thoughts were ever the same as the thoughts of his master.

After the passage of the Baron de Retz and his men, Hugh noticed that the boy cautiously turned his head toward the road again and, seeing the way momentarily clear, ran out into the center of it. Here was no beggar boy. Here was a phenomenon which fraternized with the clergy, hid from the gentry on horseback, and was now approaching a burgher on a mule.

The set face of the armorer and the dark foreign countenance of the Turk frightened the boy and caused him to forget the simpler message and to stammer out parts of the complicated one.

"When it please God to discharge and renew," he pronounced, "it is a good work to be silent until such time."

Hugh and his servant crossed themselves. No, no beggar, poor lad. Just a mad little boy.

"Out of my way, fool!" cried Abdul, laying his hand on the jeweled dagger at his waist and bending his turbaned head toward the lad in an exaggerated gesture of menace.

Pierre began to cry.

"But the monk said maybe you would take me home. I'm hungry, and I haven't any home."

"What monk, boy?" asked the armorer.

"The monk Isambart."

"Who is Isambart?"

"Father Isambart de la Pierre. He is with the other monks just beyond the Baron de Retz."

"That is true," said the armorer.

"He told me to speak to the armorer Hugh of Milan, and he will talk to him later."

"Oh, ho! He told you my name!"

"He said it would be a good work, but he also said," here Pierre determined to tell the worst, "that it would not hurt me to fast this day because it is a sad day. But I'm hungry on sad days, too."

Hugh of Milan smiled, but he answered: "I must say, you don't look it. Never have I seen such good bright eyes."

"That is a fever, master," the Turk interposed.

"Fever, lad? There is no sickness about. And look at your hands. Have you been setting fires?"

The reaction to his banter was more than the words or the tone of their speaking could warrant. Pierre began to sob again, with heart-breaking abandon.

"Take him up, Abdul," the armorer ordered. "I meant only to plague him a little."

The servant crooked a mighty arm around the boy's waist and drew him up onto his mule.

"There, my laddie. Hush, my little one. Quiet, thou golden-haired Frank, or the wicked baron will—"

"Careful, Abdul!"

"Pardon, my master. A thousand pardons. I ought to have known better." He wiped away the boy's tears with his sleeve. "Are you all right now?"

"I'm all right. I was crying about the fire."

"What fire, child?"

Pierre told them, jerkily, what had happened during the night. After the tragic recitation both men were very quiet. "That is how I burned my hands," Pierre added, as if he had been guilty of something.

"You're a good boy," the armorer said in a comforting voice. "And even if you were not, I'd help you for the sake of Father Isambart."

Abdul addressed Hugh of Milan with dignity.

"Master!"

"Yes, Abdul?"

"I have a confession to make to you. I have dates in my turban."

"For shame!"

"I am ashamed. It is an old habit."

"How many times have I told you not to carry food about in that barbarous fashion! Haven't you had trouble enough on account of your turban? Do you want people to think there is magic in it, producing strange tropical fruit at any time of the day, untouched by corruption and dripping with sweetness that is not honey? Half the people in France are still terrified by dates. How many have you left?"

"Not many, master. I have been eating them at night."

"By all means give the boy some. But first, I'd better try one or two to make sure that they are not spoiled."

"That is a wise precaution, master."

Abdul soberly reached up to his turban and drew out a small package wrapped in glazed leather of exquisite thinness. When he opened it, Pierre saw a dozen or so curious brown fruits which were certainly not attractive to the eye. But out of the package spread a delectable aroma of such enticing sweetness that his hungry stomach seemed to turn and contract within him. The armorer ate one, and then another, and then a third. "They are not spoiled," he said regretfully. Abdul put one into Pierre's mouth and held the package firmly in his other hand, as if further testing were unnecessary.

"There is a stone in each one," said Abdul. "Do not eat the stone, but do not throw it on the road either. Many people have never seen the stones that lie in the heart of this harmless nourishing fruit, and they might be afraid of them. Save them, as the master has done, or at least let me hurl them into the bushes when nobody is looking."

"That is a wise precaution, Abdul," Hugh said with a sly smile. Master and slave, master and servant, they had been so long together that they could almost read each other's thoughts.

Then in the distance, ahead of the Baron de Retz and his men, they descried another courier, gorgeously clad in the ecclesiastical livery of the Bishop of Beauvais, leading a horse without a rider and rapidly bearing down upon Isambart and his monks. He halted only a moment. Isambart mounted the horse, and together they disappeared in the direction of Rouen, showering the people with the dust and stones that flew from the thundering hoofs.