

# The Lady's Lists

A Complete Story

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ALOYS, Countess of Terraine, mounted her horse and rode forth to seek an adventure. Over a shirt of chain-mail she wore a tunic of white cloth, richly embroidered; her hose and cloak were green, and so was her feathered cap; she was armed with sword and dagger. With her glowing cheeks and ardent eyes, her fair short curls, firm mouth, and eager chin, she looked like a brave young knight, new-vowed to the service of God.

Yet, truth to tell, no holy quest inspired this errant lady, unless a desire to take the Kingdom of Love by storm be one. She was without male kindred, and her counsellors told her that she must wed betimes or risk the loss of her rich fief of Terraine, upon which her more powerful neighbors cast covetous eyes. Therefore, on her twentieth birthday, she had publicly vowed to her people that what-so ever suitor for her hand could succeed in making her of her free will kneel to him should share with her the throne of her ancient suzerainty, and be her beloved lord.

So much faith did she place in her pride.

The rumor went out over broad France that a fair lady and her heritage were to be won on this light condition, and many great nobles and famous knights came to try their fortune with her, but were sent crest-fallen away. A year passed slowly; the cares of state lay heavily on her restless spirit, her castle walls grew too straight for her, and she longed to seek her fate like a man in the world of men. Early on a May morning, then, did she ride forth alone from Château Beauré, none dreaming that she would pass the bounds of her wide demesne.

Mist hung in the valleys like the veil over a spell-bound sleeper, but the truant Countess plunged through it heedlessly, her horse's hoofs waking faint echoes as she made for the hills. At noontide she reached the village of Bas-Pierre, near her frontiers, drawing rein in the marketplace, where the peasants crowded round her, recognizing her with amazement great as if some goddess had come down among them. One man seemed to watch her strangely from beneath lowering brows, but when her eyes fell on him he turned away.

"Do not heed him, lady," said the innkeeper, by virtue of his office head man of the village, on her remarking this. "It is Udo, a knave of Sir Fulke le Noir, whom your father—the saints rest his soul!—dispossessed. Outlaws all, eagles and wolves?"

"How comes he here?"

"Know you not, honored lady, that it is scarce an hour's journey for horse and rider to the hill-country Sir Fulke claims as his own? Look yonder!"—he pointed towards a dark line past the fertile lowlands of Terraine, where forests began to climb the distant slopes of the mountains. "Half a day's journey through Pays Duresse, so you hap upon the right road, you will reach the Eagle's eyrie among the rocks, whence even your warlike father failed to dislodge him. Secure there, he keeps the hill-country in terror, levying dues twice over that are paid by rights to you. I myself have never seen him, but the Eagle's beak hath pecked at us in Bas-Pierre now and again."

The Countess clenched her fists. "I will look into the matter, and if this outlaw knight defies us, so much the worse for him!"

"Have a care, lady, that you fall not into his hands!"

"I fear not. Without leaving my territory I shall spy out this Château Duresse, and decide for myself whether it pass the wit of man—or woman—to compass its downfall. Come, set me on my road thither, and keep my counsel, lest it be the worse for you!"

The innkeeper pompously motioned his fellow-villagers aside, and marched at his lady's stirrup until out of their sight. She drew rein for an instant while he showed her the way, gave him largesse of a broad gold piece, and rode on.

It was not the first time she had heard of Sir Fulke, Lord of Duresse des Rochers. He had fought against the English, and made his name a terror to them at a time when the surrounding provinces lay helpless under the heel of the conqueror, and Aloys in maiden dreams had thought of him as a hero. Of late, moreover, her tirewoman Bertha's whispers of *L'Aigle sans Ailes*, a bold knight and handsome,

lonely in his impregnable eyrie, had fired her imagination, so with a quickened pulse she entered the dark forests of Pays Duresse. Birds of prey screamed in the branches overhead, and often there was a stir of some wild beast in the undergrowth, while the rough path wound upwards, becoming at times almost impassable. Sunset fell before she was aware, but as her heart began to fail her the trees thinned out and ceased, and her horse reared up, snorting, upon the brink of a deep cleft in the hills. Far below a torrent raged and foamed along its bed of black boulders, and on the farther side its precipitous walls rose to a lofty peak of rock crowned by an ancient fortress, with a black banner floating from its topmost turret like a pirate-craft afloat in the sea of glory of the western sky.

Aloys drew a long breath, knowing this for the goal of her endeavors; but, as she gazed on Château Duresse in wonder, there was a scurry behind her, and, looking round, she caught a brief glimpse of Sir Fulke's knave, Udo, in the act of throwing a great cloth over her head. Blinded and stifled by the thick folds, she was dragged struggling from her horse and her ankles were bound; then she felt herself lifted by feet and shoulders and carried through an endless maze of darkness until she swooned.

When her senses returned, the Lady Aloys was lying on a pallet bed under a sheepskin rug, in a dungeon lighted by a single taper in a sconce of stone. A trestle table beside her bore a basin of steaming broth and a hunk of black bread, and being hungry she ate eagerly. Thus refreshed she set herself to beat against the heavy door with the hilt of her sword and to shout loudly; but no answer came, and at length, tired out, she lay down to sleep. When she awoke, a shaft of sunlight was streaming through a narrow loophole high up near the roof, and on the table stood a basin and pitcher of cold water, with a further dole of unappetising bread. No sooner had she broken fast and arranged her attire than there came a thundering knock at the door. The great bolts shot back, and a tall man entered, standing mute with folded arms on the threshold. He was handsome, in a fierce aquiline style, with black moustache and hair; he wore no mail under his furred knightly robe, and carried no weapons.

"If it be you who has committed this outrage, what is your intent?" cried the Countess, confronting him with eyes of fire. He returned her gaze in haughty silence.

"Where am I?" she cried again, beginning to tremble.

"Come and see," was his sole answer.

He walked quickly along stone corridors, across vaulted halls, up flight after flight of spiral stairs, never glancing behind him, and, with rage in her heart, she went on at his heels like a dog, seeing not a living soul by the way. Finally ascending a staircase steeper than all the rest, they came out upon a turret encircled by a high stone parapet, where flew a black standard, with its device of a wingless eagle glinting gold in the rays of the morning sun.

"Where am I?" repeated Aloys, though her heart failed her, for she knew.

He beckoned her over to the parapet, and her head swam as she looked down a thousand feet into the depths of a foaming gorge, over walls that seemed built in one with the living rock. Tracts of dark forest hemmed her round, and on all sides but one rose height after height of the hills; this one side being her own Terraine. The only approach to the wind-rocked eyrie seemed to be a steep road commanded by both faces of an angle of the castle walls, which were perforated all over with loopholes for arrow and crossbolt. Hereabouts the hills were swept clear of herbage for the space of a bowshot that they might leave no cover for a lurking enemy, while the road was cut in twain by a broad and deep crevasse with a fortified drawbridge. Well might they call Château Duresse impregnable; starvation seemed the only weapon that could be brought against it.

"Is it ransom you desire?" cried Aloys passionately.

"Ay, rich ransom. I would restore the wings to my eagle, look you, that were shorn by your father in my childhood. My father died by the hands of his men as he pursued his conquests even to these walls, where my mother bravely defied him, preserving this trait rock to us alone out of our once broad lands of Pays Duresse. It is left for you and me to settle their quarrel. You have seen me before."

She shook her head with a puzzled air. "One night I sat unchallenged among the guests at feast in your halls, and beheld how you flouted the Prince of Navarre. 'So,' thought I, here is the lady who would learn how to kneel to a man—cannot I teach her?" The saints have answered my prayers."

"I! Kneel to you? Not if you bade your retainers cast me living into that abyss—not if you vowed to restore me to Beauré in honor!"

He smiled inscrutably. "We shall see. Let us now return to your chamber, where you may ponder the matter at leisure. I grieve to offer a noble lady such rough cheer, but if your men besiege us we shall suffer worse things ere they have done."

The Countess's heart sank, but her proud heart did not bow, and in silence she followed her gaoler back through the empty, echoing passages to her dungeon, where he locked her in and left her until the same hour next morning.

Next day she awoke out of a heavy sleep with a start of terror, to find his gigantic figure standing beside her in full armor, with the wingless eagle-crest surmounting his iron helm. Leaning on a great cross-hilted sword that seemed a relic from crusading days, he gazed at her with inscrutable eyes.

"Rise, lady," said he courteously; "I wait without your door till you summon me."

She hastened to make ready, wondering what this might portend, and when she had called him he led her by new ways across the broad extent of the castle, ushering her out at last upon the battlements, and bidding her go forward to the ramparts alone. Afar off she beheld a swarm of archers and men-at-arms striving to make good their foothold upon the precipitous hillsides, dragging at guns and heavy siege-engines for which they could find no place. Her knights and squires were assembled before the deep crevasse fronting the drawbridge, endeavoring by means of taunts and execrations to provoke the garrison to answer them. They all shouted for joy at sight of their liege lady and made eager signs to her, endeavoring to learn how she fared, but she could only hold out her arms to them in vain longing, while the tears ran down her cheeks unchecked.

Anon Sir Fulke advanced to her side, turning a deaf ear to the roar of execration that greeted him, and looking serenely forth on his besiegers. The Countess turned to him in fury at this mockery of her power.

"Base, recreant knight, false to your vows of chivalry, do you dread to meet my men in fair fray that you shelter behind these inhuman walls like a wild beast in its lair? Offer them battle on equal terms, and let my body be the prize of the issue!"

"I thought it was your desire to kneel to a man, Lady Aloys. Have you not learned your lesson?"

"I understand not. I—kneel to you?"

"Is it your will that blood be shed?" he grimly inquired. "Dost choose that these walls you rightly dub inhuman should open fire on your men who cannot reply to it?"

"Coward! Am I to die in your hands?" she cried in helpless wrath.

"You shall not die." He smiled, with a look in his eyes that made her cheeks flame. "If I cannot bring you to your knees it seems that I must even resort to mine, and so win free from this impasse. Here in the face of all these witnesses do I make my plea. Lady, I meant not what I said. On a lighter condition you may go from me."

The Countess's breath came faster as he knelt at her feet holding his iron cross-hilt aloft between them, and she glanced guiltily sidelong from her eyes, wondering if a vow made in this her extremity could be held to bind her.

"What is it you ask?" said she in a gentler tone.

"No great thing, or nothing that you will deem great, noble Countess. I do but pray that you rescind my outlawry, that in freedom I may come to Château Beauré to make suit to the lady I love."

The hot color flooded Aloys' cheeks again, and her eyes fell in confusion; then her heart leaped at the thought that she might by this means punish her foe for his presumption, and she forced her lips to a gracious smile.

"Rise, Sir Eagle; it becometh not so noble a knight to kneel for so poor a boon. In safety you may come to my castle and in safety depart therefrom—here is my ring in token. It is a small price to pay for my freedom!"

"Perchance not so small," he returned, fitting her signet ring upon the little finger of his right hand. "Perchance, though I indeed go to and fro in safety, I depart not alone, but bearing forth from your halls a gift."

"I trust that my halls contain the gift that may sort with your merit, Sir Eagle. Will you not name it now?"

"Alas! lady, I fear that it lies not in your hands, for all your good will. The utmost you can do for me, beyond yielding me safe conduct, is to further me in the graces of your waiting-woman, Madame Bertha, whom I love."

His eyes shone with merciless laughter, and she nearly died for shame, knowing that he had fathomed her thought. Anger that she dared not betray possessed her, and in her secret heart stirred a pain of which she was dimly aware.

"Content yourself, sir," said she haughtily. "I never concern myself anent

the affairs of my servants. You may come and go as you please."

He rose to his feet with the air of a king resuming his majesty, and the Countess's spirit beat against him like the waves of the sea, recoiling broken from his rocky indifference. He tied a white napkin like a pennon to his lance and held it above the ramparts. A great shout went up, and the men of Terraine ceased their vain labors.

"Will you deign to follow me, lady?" said he with exaggerated deference, and led her by devious ways to the base of the fortress. Her wonder grew at its seemingly deserted state. The silence of the dead reigned everywhere; grass grew between the stones of the pavement, and dust lay like a pall on the worm-eaten furniture. The great doors stood ajar, and they passed between them into a courtyard with walls of great height and thickness, joining at an angle with the tower which commanded the road of approach. Here a handful of men were assembled, going leisurely about their duties; one was leading a great black charger up and down, another was polishing armor; one scarred veteran tinkered at the lock of a broken musket, and another was cutting arrow-shafts. The knave Udo peered out over the wall from the top of a ladder, and an old woman slopped about with mop and bucket. There were less than a dozen all told.

"My garrison," said Sir Fulke with a magnificent gesture. "Baldwin, open the gates."

Her horse was brought, and, spurning his assistance, she sprang to the saddle, and passed the gates, followed by Sir Fulke on his black charger. Over the drawbridge she rode alone to meet her men, who welcomed her with hearty joy, but made menacing gestures towards the huge figure standing motionless under the frowning archway, until she forbade them, explaining the terms of her release.

When all had turned to descend the steep hillside, leaving him to his lonely triumph, of a sudden the Countess wheeled her horse and rode back, leaping upon the drawbridge as already it swung a foot in air. In flushed defiance she cast her green glove down before Sir Fulke, who, with a knightly salutation, dismounted and raised it, placing it in his helm like a gage.

"I accept your challenge, Countess Aloys, and will come to do battle against you on your own terms, when you will. On what field, I wonder, shall our quarrel be tried?"

"I keep the lists for you at Château Beauré in three days," she answered proudly. "I need no champion to avenge me for your insults, Sir Eagle, being well practised in arms."

"May Heaven defend me!" he cried, reining back his horse, and with an iron clangor the portcullis fell.

The Countess, upon gaining her apartments after a sharp, silent ride, summoned her tirewoman, Bertha, a dark-browed, harsh-featured girl, very taciturn, and for this reason a favorite with her mistress, who cared little for women's chatter.

"How long have you been with me?" she inquired, looking coldly upon her with steely blue eyes.

"Some five months, madame."

"Whence came you?"

"From Duresse des Rochers, where I served the Lady Herminie le Noir ere she died."

"Why was I not told of it?"

"There was little that I deemed would interest you, madame; though indeed you have listened readily enough when I spoke of her son."

"Insolent!" flashed out the Countess.

"Hear me now, wench, and obey. Three days hence I keep the lists in a gentle joust of arms against all comers, and you shall be Queen of Beauty and crown the victor. Attire you in the richest stuffs in my wardrobe, and take such jewels as please you to make you fair—if you can. Sir Fulke does battle against me and shall win the day; and it is you, my girl, shall crown him. Are you content?"

"I am here to obey you in all things, madame," replied the dark girl indifferently.

The lists were set on a green sward starred with daisies, beyond the castle walls, and hither came the knights of Terraine to break a light lance with their sovereign lady, whose freakish humor was known to them all. In a raised gallery canopied with cloth-of-silver the ladies clustered like a flock of bright birds about the empty throne, while gentles and burgeses crowded the benches in order of their degree, for the whole country-side was astir with the rumor of the Countess's hardihood.

At noontide a band of white-clad maidens appeared, preceded by a herald crying: "Way for the Queen of Beauty and Love," and moving slowly towards the gallery, they spread apart there like unfolding wings. The astonished assemblage beheld, throned in their midst, the stiff, ungracious figure of Bertha, the tirewoman, richly robed in crimson and emerald, with gems plaited in her long black hair and a wreath of red roses on her brow. No Queen of Beauty this, with her harsh features and sallow complexion; and the ladies scornfully asked one another aside whose love might she be? And whom did proud Aloys design to flout thus publicly?

A fanfare of trumpets announced the challenger, who rode on her white horse

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