



WHEN Jacopo Donatello stepped from the pirogue to drag it out of the water, the scrape of the bottom across the shells startled a tern from the rushes. It was that quiet. A safe enough rendezvous, thought Dominique for discussion of the dangerous business he had come on from New Orleans.

"Listen, Jacopo," he said. "This just isn't done anymore. The Americans have cutters in the Gulf all the time, and dragoons in the bayous. They won't even let a gig get through here. I tell you, it won't go, holding a girl for ransom. This is 1826. Things aren't like they used to be."

Jacopo turned to Dominique. How many times had he seen the old gunner run up the rigging like a monkey? That was when they had sailed together with Lafitte,

before Dominique had settled down to a less hazardous life.

Now Dominique almost tipped over the pirogue, climbing out, and he was bent forward long enough for Jacopo to see how thin his hair was getting on top.

"Why aren't things like they used to be?" said Jacopo. "Jean Lafitte has returned, and New Orleans is still here, and you, and I."

"Being Lafitte the *Bos*, doesn't mean what it used to mean, Jacopo," Dominique told him. "Don't you understand that? This ransom business won't go."

"Signorina Lacourte's father sent you to make the arrangements, no?" Jacopo asked him. "And when the arrangements are settled, you will take them back to him and he will give you the money, no? And with

the money we buy a ship, and when they learn Jean Lafitte is back every Baratarians from New Orleans to Gran' Terre will come flocking like a pelican to a dead mackerel. What do you mean, it won't go?"

"I mean the old days are gone. Don't you understand? There are no more Baratarians, as we knew them. Beluche is gone. Hambio is gone. Desfarges is gone. All of it." Dominique jerked a hairy hand out toward the bayou. "I saw Desfarges hanging from the yardarm of the United States cruiser anchored at the foot of Saint Anne Street, Jacopo. Do you want to see the *Bos* there? That's what will happen to him if you don't stop this. Lacourte's a power in New Orleans, and they'll get the *Bos* if he tries to stay here with that girl."

"We aren't staying here," said Jacopo. "We're going to Gran' Terre after I take you back to New Orleans."

Dominique's face paled. "No, Jacopo. Not that girl. If the *Bos* takes her out there —"

"He never laid a hand on a woman," said Jacopo.

"No—" a hint of a smile caught at Dominique's mouth—"not that way. Not the way you treated your woman. He never had to. Not with his touch." Then his mouth grew thin. "You know what I'm talking about. You know the *Bos*. How long has it been since there was a woman?"

Jacopo hesitated, shrugged. "Since before he had the fever in Sinal. Four-five years."

"Then how do you know—"

"He won't touch her. Maybe he was that way with women, but when he gave his

word they never got hurt, did they? He promised Lacourte the girl would be returned safely on payment of the money. He's the *Bos* and he gave his word, that's all."

Dominique shrugged. "I guess that was a mistake, trying to appeal to you through the girl, wasn't it, Jacopo? I guess what happened to this girl wouldn't bother you much, after the way they found your wife on Campeachy. What did she do to make you so mad, Jacopo, that you beat her to death? What did Maria do? Even her hands. All broken up like that."

"Shut up," said Jacopo, and there was bitterness in his eyes. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I should think not," said Dominique, goading him. "How many years ago? Six, now. Six years since they found Maria dead on the Campeachy beach with her hands all broken up. It's a long time to have something like that inside you—"

"Will you shut up!" screamed Jacopo, and he jumped toward the man with his hands out. Dominique knocked one aside to grab Jacopo by the shirt front, pulling him on in. The old strength hadn't left the gunner, and for a moment, Jacopo stood, rigid, in the grasp, a small, brown, weakened man, his narrow, lined cheeks a strange putty color beneath the faded crimson of the bandanna about his head. Always this antipathy had lain between them, each so jealous of whatever favor the other found in Lafitte's eyes.

"YOU'D better let me go, Dominique," Jacopo said finally.

"Why?" Dominique pulled Jacopo up

against him. “What will you do if I don’t let you go—pull your sword?” A baleful grin spread his lips. “Or are you just going to talk about it, like always? Go ahead. Tell me how you were fencing master in Salle Palusco at Ravenna, Jacopo. Tell me how my lunge will get me killed some day. Is it the same way with every Frenchman? Even the *Bos*? Tell me how the *Bos* has his weight divided evenly on both legs, so he has to shift to free his right leg just before lunging. Does that give him away, Jacopo? Would a man watching for that shift know when the lunge was coming? Tell—”

“Dominique!”

“Yes, Jacopo?” Dominique shoved Jacopo back so hard he almost fell, and elbowed his coat to free the hilt of his sword. “I’ll let you go. I want you to show me how it is. Show me how you always fight with more weight on your back leg so you don’t have to shift for a lunge. Is that the Italian school? Go ahead, *mon ami*. Show me how the *Bos* always has to shift after a double feint before he can lunge. Is that the French school? I’m a Frenchman, Jacopo. Show me.”

“Maybe—” Jacopo’s words came out hoarse on his breath. “Maybe some day I will, Dominique.”

“*Messieu!*”

Jacopo couldn’t count the expression that passed across Dominique’s face before he turned around, or recognized it. Perhaps Dominique was remembering all the other times he had heard that voice. Perhaps he was remembering how it had sounded outside the Cabildo that night the *Bos* almost got killed helping the gunner escape the old jail. Or how it sounded holding the

most beautiful women in New Orleans spellbound at that ball they threw for the *Bos* after he and Jackson beat the British in 1815. Or...

But what did that matter now? It was Jean Lafitte, stepping out of the oaks. He must have heard them, and he walked down the sand with that limp he got boarding the *Concepcion* in ‘19. Dominique stared blankly at him, mouth open slightly. Maybe it wasn’t the tight yellow broadcloth trousers any more, or the swallowtail with the fleur-de-lys on its lapels, that he wore when he commanded a thousand men on Barataria. Did that make so much difference? Maybe the brine on his old frock-coat and forage cap was so thick you couldn’t tell the original color, and his hair was showing gray—But what did that matter? He was still the *Bos*, wasn’t he?

“*Bos!*” It sounded as if someone jerked it from the old gunner. Then he ran forward to grab the *Bos*’s hand. “I haven’t seen you in so long. We heard you died of malaria at Sinal.”

IT was the first time Jacopo had seen the *Bos* smile since Campeachy, and he let Dominique shake his hand, and Jacopo realized that, for that minute, it must be the old days for him.

“A little fever,” he grinned. “Jacopo took care of that.” Then he was looking at Dominique’s fancy gilt-edged cutaway and high white stock and glistening black boots, and his smile slid off as a breaker leaves the beach. He pulled his hand away. “You’ve done well in New Orleans, Dominique.”

The old gunner tried to laugh it off, shrugging. But his gaze dropped to the sand. “How much longer you going to take it, Jacopo?”

“What?”

Lafitte turned to the Italian. “What was going on down here?”

Jacopo shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter,” the *Bos* said, and Jacopo could see the rage fanning up to him. “Don’t tell me it doesn’t matter, you Italian shrimper.”

“Don’t call me that, *Bos*,” Jacopo said, because there was probably no worse insult to an old Baratarian.

Lafitte’s left eye closed. “Don’t tell me what to call you. You, the worst scum Ravenna ever cast out!”

And then Jacopo was down on the sand, tasting the salt of blood in his mouth, and the *Bos* was wiping the hand he had hit Jacopo with on his dirty frock-coat. It had been happening a lot lately. For nothing special, or for anything, like this.

Lafitte turned to Dominique, still shaking with rage.

“Lacourte?” he said stiffly.

“It was acceptable to M’sieu Lacourte for me to act as go-between,” said Dominique. “He will meet any reasonable demands you make. Your name hasn’t been mentioned.”

“Good,” said the *Bos*. “Your instructions are simple. Jacopo will take you back to New Orleans. We will give Lacourte two days in which to get the thirty thousand in gold.”

Then he called over his shoulder to Jacopo, “Bring the food you got in New Orleans before you leave again with Dominique.”

Dominique watched Jacopo as he rose.

“How much longer you going to take it, Jacopo?”

“You know what. Why do you stay with him?” Dominique nodded at the spot in the sand where the *Bos* had knocked the Italian. “This way all the time, now? What about Sinal?”

Jacopo shrugged, wiping at the blood on his mouth. “We used to have a lot of fever at Ravanna. My mother had a remedy—”

“So you nurse him as if he was a baby. You sit up with him every night and give him your mother’s remedy. And if it isn’t the fever, it’s something else. That used to be your frock coat. Does he get your food when there isn’t enough to go around? How many years, Jacopo? Five? All for this.” He nodded toward the sand again. “None of the others would have taken it. Why you?”

“It isn’t that bad.”

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “He isn’t the same *Bos*, Jacopo, I can see. He’s getting old, and it’s this way all the time, and you’re a damn sot to stay with him. Can’t you see it’s over, Jacopo? Through. Finis!” He leaned forward a little farther. “Or maybe you do see, Jacopo. Maybe you just don’t have the courage to quit. You’re afraid of him, Jacopo. You let him swear at you and spit on you and beat you like you were his dog. *Mon Dieu*, no man would take that. Double feint? What do you know about a double feint? What do you know about the way a Frenchman lunges? Why do you wear that cutlass at all? The only thing you know is, ‘Yes, *Bos*, no *Bos*, thanks, *Bos*.’ ”

Jacopo turned his back and walked to

the pirogue. Why, he was thinking, should I expect Dominique to understand? He left the *Bos*, didn't he? *Si*. Then why should I expect him to understand?

HE lifted the basket of food from the prow of the pirogue and passed Dominique without looking at him. He took the basket to the clearing, and the *Bos* was there, and it seemed to Jacopo as if the *Bos* were trying to pull in his stomach, and Jacopo couldn't understand, at first. Lafitte's legs were spread apart, the way he used to stand at poop deck, and the old frock coat was thrown aside so he could put one hand in the sash.

"You will lay out the lunch before you go, Jacopo," Lafitte said. Then he leaned toward the girl and tried to make his voice softer. How many times had Jacopo seen what his voice could do to a woman? Once, it had been compared to the caress of a courtesan's hand. "*Le petit gouave*, Mam'selle Lacourte. Something a little special. General Humbert used to drink it at Thiot's."

The girl said nothing. She sat on the stump of an oak, the turban of coral-colored silk accentuating the pallor of her face.

"I said General Humbert used to drink it at Thiot's," Lafitte repeated. "Still the girl did not speak. Lafitte laughed, and Jacopo tried to remember what someone had once compared his laugh to, and couldn't, because it wasn't the same, either.

Lafitte turned to Jacopo, trying to sound amused. "All night this way. Not a word from her. How do you make a woman talk? Is she—" He paced jerkily away, waving

his arm at Jacopo. "Lay out the lunch, then go and get Dominique back to New Orleans."

Jacopo knelt over the basket with the bottle of *petit gouave* in his hand, staring after Lafitte, and for the first time the truth in what Dominique had said struck him. Standing there trying to hide his thickening stomach from her. Beluche is gone. Standing there with his gray hair and trying to be gallant and only frightening her. Gambio is gone. Standing there and asking how you make a woman talk, when Jacopo could remember so many women, talking. Desfarges is gone.

"Perhaps if you don't want the *gouave*, you'll have some chicken gumbo." Lafitte had turned back to the girl, his left eye closed completely, his lips tight around his words. "You do know what chicken gumbo is?"

Jacopo put the bottle of *gouave* down, wondering why he hadn't seen it before. Perhaps being with him that way, you're too close to see the change, he thought. Or maybe you do see it, and blind yourself to it, because of the way you feel.

"I said, you know what chicken gumbo is!" He leaped toward the girl, unable to contain his rage any longer. She held up her hands to ward him off, and he caught them in his hairy fists. "Answer me, you Basin Street *grifa*! Say something before I beat it out of you—"

"Stop!" she cried, and her voice held a choked terror. "You're hurting my hands." Something in that caught at Jacopo, bringing him to his feet. "You're breaking my hands!"

Jacopo stared blankly, the words roaring

through his head.

“PLEASE!” the girl screamed. With a spasmodic jerk she pulled free, falling backward over the stump.

Lafitte jumped around the stump to get at her.

Jacopo, comprehending fully now, moved between him and the girl. “No, *Bos*,” he said. “Not this one.”

Lafitte stopped. His face was blank. “What?”

“You and Maria?” Jacopo’s voice was hollow.

Lafitte straightened a little. “You mean you didn’t know?”

“It never entered my mind,” said Jacopo dully. “You never laid your hands on a woman that way before. I never saw you. Six years is a long time to wait. I didn’t think it would be you at the end.”

Lafitte was beginning to tremble with rage. “She was just another *grifa*. You had enough of them. What does it matter?”

“Was that your first meeting with her, there on the beach?” said Jacopo. “I’d like to think that. I’d like to think that’s the kind she was. That was why she was crying the night before, and wouldn’t tell me. Wouldn’t she take you, *Bos*? Is that what made you so mad—”

“Shut up!” Lafitte’s voice rose to a shout. “Get out and take Dominique back to New Orleans. Get out before I run you through!”

“No, *Bos*,” said Jacopo. “Not this one. Not like Maria. Not on the beach with her hands all broken up.”

It took a moment for that to reach Lafitte, perhaps because Jacopo had been

with him so long and had never told him no, like that, before.

Then he roared into action.

He was turning his blade for a cut, and only a man in such a rage would open his attack like that. Jacopo had his saber out and parried Lafitte’s wild cut to the body and got out from in front of the tree before Lafitte ‘could pin him there.

“Dog!” shouted Lafitte. “Dog!” And rushed again. How many times had Jacopo heard his feet tap like that, advancing on someone else? Then his engagement. A beat in tierce. Like a blacksmith hitting his anvil. Retreating before that beat with his sweating face following you, waiting for his lunge. There was nothing so terrifying.

“Viola” That was the *Bos*, and Jacopo wondered how many men who were dead now had heard him yell it before they met his blade. “Viola!” And his cut to Jacopo’s head made a flash in front of the Italian’s eyes.

Jacopo was so sloppy as he tried to parry the cut that by the time he realized the cut was only Lafitte’s feint, Lafitte was already in his lunge. There was only one thing left here for a man of Jacopo’s age. It was automatic. But even as he took the jump backward, he felt the blow against his ribs. Someone yelled, and he saw Dominique standing between the trees, and he knew how badly he was touched even before he felt the pain.

It doesn’t matter, thought Jacopo. It doesn’t matter, Dominique. I saw his lunge; that is all that matters. The flexion of his knees to shift the weight off his right leg an instant before. A Frenchman, Dominique.

“*En garde*, Jacopo.”

Lafitte came in again, and Jacopo was so dizzy he took the man’s *sforzo* for another beat and Lafitte’s blade struck Jacopo’s before he could realize how their weapons were engaged. Jacopo’s recovery and retreat were weak, and his pants were soaked with blood. This is how it has to be, then, *Bos*. This is when it has to be.

Lafitte saw how dizzy Jacopo was and came in fast. The tap of his feet advancing. The pumping huff of his breath. I don’t know a double feint, Dominique? *En garde*, *Bos*.

HOW many times had Jacopo seen Lafitte answer an invitation in *terce* with his feint to the head and flank? Jacopo gave him the invitation, parrying the first feint to the head. Lafitte took his cut to Jacopo’s flank and was already shifting his knees for the final lunge before he realized what had happened. Having ignored the second feint to his flank, Jacopo was in perfect balance to parry Lafitte’s lunge the moment he saw that flexion of the knees. And then, with Lafitte still off balance, Jacopo made his own lunge.

*Addio*, *Bos*. One, two three. That was

how it came. So simple. Lunge, Parry. Riposte. *Addio*, *Bos*.

After he went down they all stood looking at him, and there was a pain in Jacopo that did not come from the wound, and he could not understand that. It shouldn’t be, now that he knew about Maria.

“Jacopo, if your wound hurts—”

“It isn’t the wound,” Jacopo said. His voice had a strangled sound. The wetness on his face wasn’t blood, but he didn’t even try to wipe his eyes. He was not ashamed. Didn’t Dominique understand how it was when you’d been with a man like the *Bos* that long? Even knowing about Maria could not change it.

“Take her out,” he said, waving his sword at the girl.

Dominique took her arm and moved her through the trees, and in that last moment, turned back, looking at the *Bos*. “But Jacopo—why?”

Jacopo started to say something and then stopped. It was between him and the *Bos*, really, and Dominique didn’t understand.

“Because you were right, Dominique,” he said finally. “The old days are gone.”