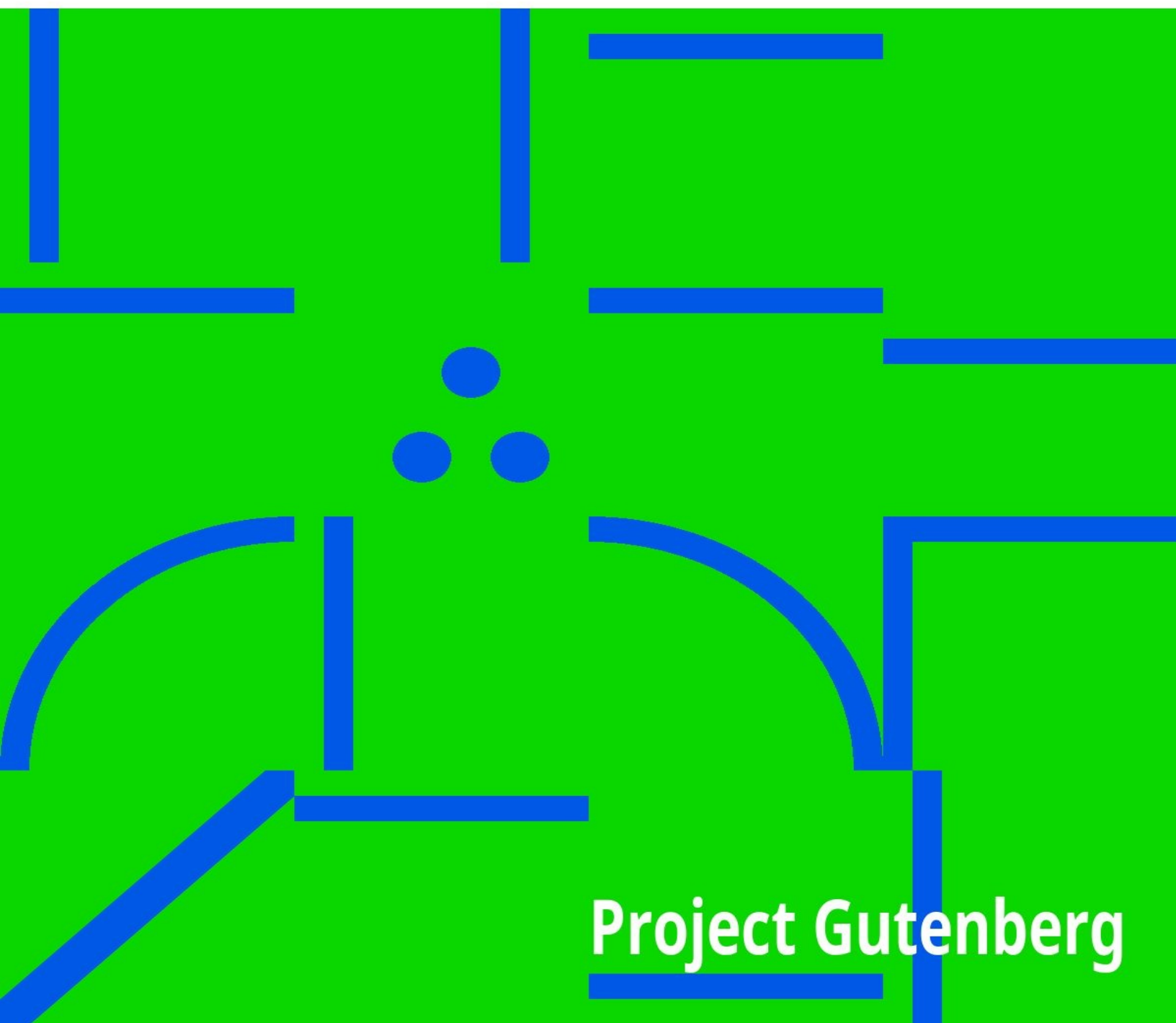


The Executioner

Frank Riley



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THE executioner

Illustrated by Kelly Freas
Illustrated by Kelly Freas

*The vote was three to two for death!
Jacques had no choice. He was a public
servant with a duty....*

BY FRANK RILEY

"... Continued fair weather and the unusual circumstances of the execution promise a turn-away crowd of more than 100,000 spectators by Court time. All unreserved tent space has been sold out for several days. Next news at..."

Sir Jacques de Carougne, Lord High Executioner for the Seventh Judicial District, spun the dial on the instrument panel of his single-seater rocket, but the vidcasts were over for another hour. He cursed, without too much vigor, and wished he had troubled to look at a vidcast or faxpaper during his vacation. But then he shrugged his massive shoulders.

What did it matter? After a thousand executions, everything was instinct and reflex. Some died hard; some died easy. Some fell to their knees, too paralyzed with fear to fire their own shots. Others fought daringly, even with a degree of skill, but always the end was the same: A broken body bleeding and twitching in the dust; the blood-happy spectators shrieking in the ecstasy of release from the humdrum of their pushbutton lives; the flowers, the scented kerchiefs and the shreds of torn garments showered on him by screaming women, who always seemed to find him more satisfactory in the arena than in his tent.

As the skyline of New Chicago shimmered into view, Jacques flipped on the 'copter mechanism. His air speed braked, and the needle-nosed little craft drifted lazily down the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, then veered westward over the tinted glass rooftops of the spotless city.

Jacques stared glumly down at the city that had been so much a part of his life, from the long-ago years of his training and youth to the professional years of his most famous executions.

Farther to the west, out beyond the eternally green landscaping and the precise, functional homes of the residential suburbs, Jacques saw the crude stone parapets of the Chauveny judicial arena, surrounded by acre after acre of colorful tents and pavilions.

His powerful, jutting nose wrinkled with disgust, but his eyes widened at the number of tents. There must indeed be something unusual about today's execution. He hadn't worked before that big a crowd for years. The Federal

Bureau of Internal Tranquility should be happy about this one!

Jacques sighed, still struggling against the despondency that had been within him since the vacation interlude with the brunette government worker in Curaçao had ended as unsatisfactorily as all the rest. Someday it would be his body bleeding in the dust, smashed at last by the soft-nosed bullets from *Le Pistolet du Mort*. Then the flowers and adulation would go to the condemned man, and the Bureau would add his name to the plaque at the base of the towering statue on the Washington Mall. So be it. He had played a long roll of the dice, and the stakes had been high. But if only once, just once before it ended....

The bell on his instrument panel told him that the servo-pilot in the tower below had taken over for the landing. He sniffed with disgust again, but this time the disgust was for himself. God, but he was in a foul humor today! He released the controls and stared at his strong hands, grimly admiring them. There was still speed as well as strength in these fingers. His lips twisted into a thin smile, cold and confident. Whoever he was to meet at *joute à l'outrance*, let him try to match twenty years of training and skill!

His rocket cradled with scarcely a jar into the small landing space at the north end of the arena, between the two replicas of 15th century towers, reproduced so faithfully by 22nd century technicians. Jacques squeezed his huge frame through the door of the small craft and looked dourly around. A squire, in scarlet leggings and tunic, his long black wig slightly askew, came running toward him and knelt three paces away, as prescribed by the Judicial Code of Heraldry.

"Oh, sire!" he panted, "Thanks be that ye have arrived! The hour is well past noonday, and we had begun to fear..."

"Time enough," Jacques growled. He gestured impatiently, and the squire clambered to his feet, bowing again.

"This way, your Lordship!"

The squire led him to the lower room in the north tower. It was the usual room of monastic simplicity—whitewashed stone walls, a single window, two wooden benches and a low couch on which his garments for the occasion had been carefully arrayed. After the execution, he would be moved to his black silk tent in the center of the camping grounds.

While the squire fluttered around him, eager to be of help, Jacques removed his

short-sleeved dacron shirt, kicked off his sandals and stepped out of the comfortable shorts he always wore for traveling. The squire gaped with awe at the sight of his muscular body.

"M'Lord, truly thou art a powerful man!"

Jacques looked down at him with mixed contempt and amusement. The squire was a thin, pale little man, with the pinched look of nearsightedness about his eyes. His wig and tunic were much too big for him.

"What do you do, Squire?" Jacques inquired, not unkindly.

The man looked hurt, as if the question reflected somehow on his ability to serve as a squire to the Lord High Executioner.

"Computer development," he muttered. "Resonating pentode circuits." Then he drew himself up defensively, with not a little pride. "But I placed at the top of the list in the Bureau's test for squires!"

"That's fine," Jacques commented drily. "Now hurry, let's see what you learned...."

"Dress him handsomely, Squire!" boomed a taunting voice from the doorway. "Our Lord High Executioner faces a rare challenge this day!"

Jacques recognized the voice of Guy de Archambault, the Court Bailiff, whose bilious nose he intended to grind into the dust one of these fine days. But his anger at the Bailiff's intrusion was overbalanced by curiosity.

"What's all the excitement about?" he demanded. "Who's on the docket, anyway?"

The Bailiff grinned mockingly.

"Forsooth, M'Lord, restrain thy impatience! In the Court's good time wilt ye learn...."

"Oh, knock off that drivel, will you! Court's not in session yet...."

The Bailiff's huge belly shook with laughter.

"Have it your own way, Jacques, m'boy! But in any vernacular the meaning's the same—you're in for quite a surprise, if rumor has it right!"

"Out with it, then! I can see you've been waiting to tell me."

The grin broadened on the Bailiff's puffy lips.

"You can bet your last sou on that! It would have broken my heart not to be the first to tell you...."

Jacques took a threatening step toward him.

"I'll break more than your heart if you don't answer my question...."

"Patience, pa—Oh, all right!" the Bailiff hastily interrupted himself as Jacques took another step in his direction. "You've got a woman to shoot down this time—and that's just half the story!"

Jacques' craggy features hardened into immobility.

"What's the rest of it, fool?"

"There's gossip going around that she's a page out of your past—maybe several pages, or even a whole chapter!"

Jacques leaped the rest of the distance to the door and grabbed the Bailiff by his lace collar, twisting it until his round, fat cheeks swelled and reddened.

"Who is it?"

"L-Lady Ann—of—Coberly!"

Jacques thumped his head against the side of the doorway.

"I told you to knock off that drivel."

"But—but that's all I know—I swear it! I just got here this morning, too, and took a quick peek at the calendar when I heard all the rumors out among the tents...!"

Jacques shoved him out into the hallway, and stalked back into the room. The Bailiff straightened his collar, but made no move to leave.

"M'Lord," he jibed, breathing heavily, "there's also a rumor that you have no stomach for executing any woman. Can that be true?"

Jacques only scowled in reply, but he knew that *this* rumor, at least, was true. The last woman had been back in the Fifth Judicial District. A flint-faced

murderess with the shoulders of a man. But the horror of firing the coup du mort into her naked, contorted body still came back to haunt his dreams. For weeks afterwards he hadn't been able to touch the women who came so eagerly to his tent during the wild execution night Festivals.

The Bailiff's coarse voice continued to prod at him:

"I'm sure you'll remember this one, once you see her! I've just come from watching her being dressed for Court!" The Bailiff's bloodshot right eye winked suggestively. "My duty, y'know, to protect their Judicial Highnesses by checking for concealed weapons."

"Get out of here!"

The Bailiff fell back a step, but continued talking.

"I'd say she's your type all right—full of fire! Too bad you have to kill her instead of...."

Jacques ripped the white tunic from his squire's trembling hands and hurled it into the Bailiff's face. Guy de Archambault waddled back out of danger, then finding that he was not followed, poked his head around the edge of the door.

"Prithee, Sir Jacques, have ye any message for their Judicial Highnesses?"

"Yes, damn you! Tell them to get someone else for this infernal execution—and be quick about it!"

With a gleeful chuckle, the Bailiff disappeared again. The little squire picked up the white tunic and brushed it off dejectedly. If he missed this opportunity to serve as squire to the Lord High Executioner, his name would rotate to the bottom of the list and he might not have a chance to serve again before it was time to make up new lists.

Jacques strode to the window. Lady Ann of Coberly. The name could mean anything or nothing, according to the whimsy of the lower courts. Lady Ann... Ann! But it couldn't be her—Or could it? Jacques looked far down the years to a youngster just out of training, eager to prove himself in the execution arena. There had been an Ann then, and she had left one morning taking a young man's heart with her, leaving behind only the unfathomable look of reproach and disappointment that he had come since to know so well.

But it couldn't be that Ann! He tried to create the image of her face, but saw only the acres of spectator tents, their bright pennants snapping in the wind, and the open squares teeming with spectacular costumes copied from medieval history books by an atomic age which found in the pageantry of execution-day its one escape from safe, sanitized, prescribed living. The Arthurian song of a strolling minstrel drifted up to him....

"To the fairest of all maidens,
To Argante, the Queen, most beauteous elf,
She will make my wounds all sound,
And with a healing draught make me full well...."

Jacques clenched his great fists. No, he wouldn't do it. Seniority entitled him to some consideration. If necessary, he'd put a call through to the Bureau. They'd understand. His record was good. He'd always performed faithfully, meeting death every session, dealing it out to young and old alike.

But not to a woman; certainly not to a woman who might have meant a great deal to him! During the long spartan years of his training, the isolated years of monastic living at a time when youth burned strongest in him, the image of woman had become a haunting dream, unreal as the moonlight streaming through his curtainless window, untouchable as the mist of a summer morning. A sense of that image and unreality still persisted, even after all the women who had come to him so willingly and had left with that undefinable look of unhappiness deep in their eyes.

Since that woman back in the Fifth District, he'd been lucky with his executions. Not too many women drew the death penalty, and the few times women had been on his docket he had learned of it sufficiently in advance to pretend illness or make up some plausible excuse for emergency leave. But today had taken him totally by surprise.

The squire shuffled up behind him, and begged,

"Please, your Lordship, shall we not don these garments now?"

Jacques shook his head so impatiently that the squire scurried back in fright.

And then the Bailiff's voice intoned sonorously from the doorway:

"His Highness, Chief Justice of the Seventh Judicial District!"

Jacques turned in time to see the Bailiff bow low. The Chief Justice entered with a swish of ceremonial robes. He was followed by a tall, thin man, dressed in knightly costume. The Bailiff made a second bow, and spoke again:

"His Excellency, Sir Mallory, representing the Federal Bureau of Internal Tranquility!"

Jacques felt suddenly relieved. It was good to have someone from his own Bureau here. These judges were too cold, too impersonal.

The Chief Justice was carrying his wig, which was not yet fully powdered. His heavy jowls quivered with indignation.

"What's this nonsense, Sir Jacques?" he demanded imperiously. "Court is ready to convene—We have no time to get another executioner!"

"I'm sorry, your Highness, but I must ask your indulgence this one time."

"Impossible!"

Sir Mallory stepped forward and smiled in a conciliatory manner.

"Perhaps Sir Jacques does not understand all the circumstances," he said soothingly. "You see, Sir Jacques, this execution is very important to FBIT. There hasn't been a first-rate execution in nearly three years, and this is the only release we've had to offer the public in all that time. Of course, the Court still must decide in its own wisdom whether there are any grounds for setting aside the verdict, but we would not want any of our Bureau personnel to be responsible for disappointing the public."

"I've always done my duty," Jacques protested. "But this one time—"

"The FBIT is well aware of your splendid record," Sir Mallory interrupted, striking a hearty note of sincerity. "Your services have been deeply appreciated in these difficult times. Yet, we must always take the long view! Particularly 'this one time', as you say. Technology has rushed us into a world without need for strife or conflict, but man has not yet matured enough for such a world—and he needs release to prevent dangerous explosions. Believe me, Sir Jacques, it would not be wise to postpone today's execution!"

The Chief Justice cleared his throat angrily.

"And it's not wise to stand here talking while my court is waiting to convene," he snapped "Sir Mallory, can't you remind this man of his oath, his duty, and be done with it?"

Jacques felt his own anger rising.

"I know my oath," he growled, "but—"

"Of course, of course," murmured Sir Mallory, "and the FBIT shares your feelings. We also deplore—naturally—the idle gossip that is circulating to build such interest in this execution. But circumstances are beyond our control, Sir Jacques. As public servants, we must serve...."

The Chief Justice shook his wig in Jacques' face.

"Your answer, man!" he demanded. "Are you or are you not going to perform your duty?"

Sir Mallory stepped back, spreading out his hands as if to show Jacques there was nothing more he could do about it.

Jacques stood tautly erect, impassive, while his mind reeled on a hairline balance between defiance and submission. He knew that more than this one issue would be decided by his next words. His entire professional life was involved, everything he had trained and fought for since he had been selected for the service at the age of thirteen. A wrong word, and he could be dismissed by the Bureau. The rest of his years would be spent in a cubicle in some atom-powered plant, where he'd have his own button to push for two hours every day. The monotony would be intolerable after the way he had lived!

But to send his bullets smashing into the body of a woman who might be Ann... Sweat trickled down the chiseled furrows of his cheeks. Beside him, the little squire was a study in still life, poised with one foot forward, the white tunic still draped on his outstretched arm.

"Sir Jacques, we are waiting for your reply," prompted the cold voice of the Chief Justice.

A turbulent voice within Jacques urged him to turn his back on all of them, but prudence counseled that he play for time. From Sir Mallory's oily manner, he could very well have made up and circulated the gossip about his supposed past relationship with this condemned woman. It might be wise to wait a bit before

making a decision that could be so final.

Jacques bowed, and said hoarsely.

"I await the orders of the Court, Your Highness."

If the Chief Justice noted that Jacques said "await" instead of the more correct "will obey", he gave no sign of it.

"Very well," he said. "Court will convene in five minutes." He turned so abruptly that he almost bumped into the Bailiff, who was making a poor effort to cover his disappointment.

Sir Mallory smiled at Jacques, and said warmly:

"The FBIT is proud of you!"

When they had left the room, the still frightened squire stuttered:

"S-shall we d-dress, Sire?"

Jacques walked without answering to the couch and sat down on the edge of it.

"Get a move on!" he ordered. His feelings were in turmoil: He was desperately eager to see this Lady Ann, yet he dreaded the moment. If this was the Ann....

Fingers trembling, the squire anointed each muscular shoulder with three drops of perfumed oil, after which he drew over Jacques' head and upper body the white tunic—white to symbolize the purity of motive in entering the execution arena. Next came the black breeches and hose—black for the eternal remembrance of death. Over the tunic came the flaming red jupon, blazoned on the sleeves with gules and on the back with a lion rampant argent. On his left shoulder, the squire fixed a lace of white silk, representing a deed not yet accomplished. Following the execution, a woman who had won the honor in her plant lottery would cut it off.

After lacing on Jacques' boots, the squire stepped back, snatching an instant to admire his handiwork.

"Well done, Squire," said Jacques. "Now, let's be off!"

The squire flushed and beamed in gratitude. He picked up the silver case containing the two Pistolet du Mort, one for Jacques, one for the condemned person.

Court was on a portable platform in the center of the Judicial Arena. As soon as the execution was confirmed, it would be wheeled out of the way.

When Jacques stepped from the tunnel and strode toward the platform, an abrupt hush choked off the babbling and laughter in the stands. Most of the hundred thousand capacity crowd was already seated. Behind Jacques, the squire straightened his narrow shoulders with pride. This was the highpoint in a life spent among the tapes, circuits and feedback problems of computer research.

Jacques mounted the platform, bowed to the crowd and took his seat in the black-draped, carved oak chair to the left of the Bailiff. His squire stood proudly behind him. The Bailiff murmured:

"An imposing entrance for one who had only five minutes to dress! Your fair victim isn't here yet."

Jacques stonily ignored him.

An explosive cry from the stands brought the Bailiff to his feet.

"Here she comes!" he announced with a grin of anticipation. "Take a good look, Sir Jacques—it's worth while!"

Though it was the hardest thing he had ever done, Jacques refrained from looking until the woman and her two jailers had nearly reached the platform steps.

And then he looked straight at her, and the shock of it was a physical blow. This was Ann, all right. Even after all the years there was no doubt about it. She was as tall as he remembered her, and there was the same softness and warmth in the curve of her sun-brown shoulders. He suddenly felt the old ache for her.

She held a velvet robe around her shoulders, but she held it loosely, disdainfully. Under it, she was already dressed in the translucent death gown. Her thick, blond hair, much longer than the fashion of the day, fell nearly to her shoulders. On her feet were the silver sandals she would later remove, along with the velvet robe, just before stepping up on the pedestal in the execution circle.

The two jailers, each in skull cap and long black sleeveless robe, led her to the prisoner's bench below the dais where the judges would sit. The sight of her was a torment to Jacques, the ripping open of an old scar. He knew that in a moment their eyes would meet, but there was not enough strength in the corded muscles of his neck to turn his face away.

Time had been kind to her, Jacques thought in one corner of his numbed brain. There were signs of its passing, around her mouth and her eyes, but it had given her what youth could not. There was a knowing in the curve of her lips, and he wondered what her eyes would tell him now.

But she glanced first, with some amusement, at the two jailers, who held their crooked staffs at the alert position. Next, her eyes contemptuously swept the semi-circle of empty judicial chairs. They passed by the Bailiff so quickly that he looked cheated, and then they stopped full on Jacques.

He read in their calm appraisal the knowledge that she had expected him to be here, and that she was not surprised at what the years had done to him. Perhaps she had seen his pictures in the faxpapers, or even watched some of his executions. But he wanted to know more than this, and he tried to look deeper into the light and shadows of her eyes.

It was still there, he discovered, feeling a selfish sense of pleasure that she had not found what he hadn't been able to give her. The endless seeking, the search for something never put into words, the want unfulfilled—all this was still there.

He knew that she was reading him in the same way, but he could not tell what she found. Finally, it was she who looked away first, not in retreat, rather to appraise him thoughtfully. He felt her eyes on the knotted muscles of his cheeks, on his arms, on the whitened knuckles of his scarred hands, on his boots, now grey with dust from the walk across the arena. When her eyes came back to his, her unpainted lips parted in a faint smile.

She knows, thought Jacques. She knows I don't want to kill her! And then the torment in him became unbearable. What irony that out of all the years of their lives they should come back together at this moment. An impulse tugged at him to snatch his pistols from the squire's silver box and try to take her from the arena, daring any to stop them.

Then he realized that the Bailiff was standing again, that the hundred thousand spectators were surging to their feet. Trumpet fanfare blasted from the main

tunnel, signalling the arrival of the judges. Instinct brought Jacques to his feet. Ann remained seated, and rose only after the jailers nudged her with their curved staffs.

"Oyez, oyez, oyez!" cried the Bailiff into a microphone concealed in a carved boar's head. "Tis now two of the clock at aftir noone, and yon heralds bearing trumpets of devise give in knowledge unto all gentilmen, ladyes and gentilwoomen the cooming of this high and most honourable court! Remain at standing until said court is seated!"

The Chief Justice, regally stern, led the procession of judges, clerks and pages across the arena. They mounted the platform, stepping in cadence. When the robed and bewigged judges were all seated, the Bailiff raised his staff and the crowd settled down with a buzz of anticipation. High atop one of the north towers, hidden cameras picked up the scene and vidcast it around the earth, and to the satellites and lonely planet outposts.

One of the clerks picked up five rolls of parchment, untied the scarlet ribbon on each, and passed them around to the judges. The Chief Justice went through the pretext of scanning his, then nodded to the Bailiff to present the prisoner.

With a sly wink at Jacques, the Bailiff took Ann firmly by the arm and guided her three steps forward. The Chief Justice coughed the nervousness from his throat, and asked:

"Is this the Lady Ann of Coberly?"

Before the Bailiff could make the correct response, Ann gave her own impatient answer.

"I am Badge No. 7462883, Transistor Division, Coberly precision Products, Ltd."

The Chief Justice frowned at this breach of court etiquette.

"Have ye not been properly instructed?"

Ann shrugged, and the loose robe slipped lower on her shoulders.

"I suppose so, but is it necessary to waste all this time? You've got the record in front of you!"

The judges exchanged significant glances, and a delicious shudder swept

through the stands. Jacques felt time running out on him. At best the chances of a reprieve for any prisoner were small, and in face of Ann's attitude....

The Chief Justice's expression congealed into judicial impassiveness.

"Ye are charged with taking the life of a man," he began solemnly.

"That's not true!" Ann interrupted.

Her unexpected words brought a startled gasp from the spectators. The judges leaned forward alertly.

"According to the evidence ..." the Chief Justice began again.

"He wasn't a man!" Ann cried scornfully. Her glance flickered across at Jacques. "There are no more men."

Ponderously, like a slow moving river that would not be diverted from its course, the Chief Justice returned to the facts of the case:

"Ye speak in riddles, Lady Ann! The evidence makes it full clear that the victim was a man...."

"Evidence!" Ann gestured toward the breathless stands. "There is your evidence! Ask those women what they are doing here! Ask them what their great, great grandmothers were doing at the ancient wrestling matches!! Ask them if they have ever known a real man—or ask your own wives!"

The Chief Justice's impassiveness was shattered. His cheeks puffed out indignantly. A strange, tense silence gripped the women in the stands; the men drew back their padded shoulders, and shouted in reproof:

"Shame! For shame, Lady Ann!"

"Why don't you ask them?" Ann persisted.

Yes, ask them, Jacques thought, with a sudden, overpowering anger of his own. Ask them! Maybe their answers would tell why he, too, of all men, should have failed so many of them.

"Hold thy insolent tongue, woman!" roared the Chief Justice. "There remains before this Court only one issue—Did ye or did ye not strike a man to his death in the full view of scores of gentlemen and gentilwomen of Coberly?"

Ann shook her long hair in defiance.

"It wasn't a man I struck with that casing, and all the FBIT's heraldic mockery can't make him a man! I struck a bloodless slide-rule, a cold filing cabinet full of equations, a set of dull geometric patterns, an automaton that tried to treat a woman like a punched holrith card! He was no more a man than this...." She brought her elbow up so sharply that the paunchy Bailiff was toppled off balance and nearly fell. He looked frightened.

"Ye admit to the killing, then?" demanded the Chief Justice.

"I'm proud of it!"

"And ye claim no special circumstances?"

"How would you understand them?"

The crowd exploded into a frantic, unintelligible babble, and the Chief Justice slammed down his gavel. He turned to his fellow judges. Two were staring at the prisoner with an indignation that exceeded his own. The other two, both very old men, sat with heads bowed and hands fumbling with their robes.

Jacques felt his pulse leap with a hope that had seemed impossible. Could it be that after all...? Ann turned toward him, faltering for the first time, and they stared into each other's eyes.

At a curt nod from the Chief Justice, the Bailiff, still trembling, began to poll the Court.

The first two judges angrily raised their hands to signify that they were voting to uphold the death sentence of the lower court. The third judge hesitated, then held out both hands, palms down.

This brought an outburst of applause from the stands. The first palms-down vote always evoked such a demonstration, for a one-sided execution was a comparatively dull affair.

But the applause was choked off as the fourth judge slowly extended both hands, palms down. A scattering of boos and catcalls started. An ugly undercurrent rippled close to the surface. Was this woman going to win a reversal, in spite of all her insolence? If she did, the whole holiday would be spoiled, since there were no other executions on the docket. Better to have stayed home and watched

films of old executions on the FBIT's nightly vidcast!

Jacques looked away from Ann to watch the Chief Justice. The lines in Jacques' face were like gouges in a metal casting.

Acutely aware of his role, the Chief Justice stood up and drew his robe about him with great dignity, taking care to face toward the TV cameras on the north tower.

And as the Bailiff called for his deciding vote, the Chief Justice solemnly raised his right hand.

Three to two for death! A hundred thousand spectators leaped to their feet, hysterically waving their arms. Three shots for the Lord High Executioner! Two for Lady Ann! What a day this was going to be after all! Here was a truly great *joute à l'outrance*! Ann swayed a little, then smiled. Jacques closed his eyes.

Ritual and habit took over where Jacques' will could not function. His squire stepped forward, opened the silver box and offered the *Pistolets du Mort* to the Bailiff. The weapons sparkled in the sunlight. They were a modern adaptation of an ancient design, and had become official death weapons after earlier experiments had convinced the FBIT that few 22nd century men were strong enough to handle the swords and lances of chivalry. The Bailiff loaded one gun with two shells, the other with three. Then he replaced both in the silver box, closed the lid and put the box on the bench in front of the Chief Justice.

Already the judicial platform was wheeled to one side of the arena; the twin pedestals were being rolled to position in the execution circle. They were thirty inches high, and were positioned precisely sixty feet apart, each on a line with the open ends of the stands so that wild shots would not strike a spectator.

Next came the Ceremony of Confrontation, intended to symbolize that the Lord High Executioner was acting only under the compulsion of duty, without malice or any base motive.

Moving mechanically, Jacques stepped toward Ann. The jailers crossed their staffs two paces in front of her. It was the closest Jacques would be permitted to approach until the Ceremony of the Spirit, when he would kneel beside her shattered body in the dust of the arena. He also was supposed to kneel now, and silently speak a prayer for both their souls. He knelt, but could not bow his head. Ann looked down at him, and the faint, unfathomable smile returned to her lips.

"It's all right," she said softly. "You don't have to speak to me with words."

The natural, warm scent of her body came through the fragrance of the oils with which she had been anointed in her death cell. It was a remembered scent that once again drove Jacques to the brink of madness.

Her voice, husky and steady, came down to him:

"For two like us there is no other way, Jacques. Don't fail me again."

He rose stiffly, backing away, staring into the mystery of the lights and shadows in her wide eyes, groping for the meaning of her words.

A friar moved up to take his place, and the jailers dropped their staffs. But Ann dismissed the friar with a quick shake of her head.

The Code now called for Jacques to leave the platform and walk with measured steps around the arena before mounting his pedestal in the execution circle. A signal from the trumpets started him on his way before he was aware of what he was doing. The habits of a thousand executions demanded obedience.

Women in the front rows leaned far over the railing. Some reached their hands down to him, offering flowers and kerchiefs, hoarsely begging him to wear their favors during the execution. Others sat still, transfixed, lips parted and moist. The men beside them shrank back in their seats, looking at him as a sparrow would look at a coiled snake. Vendors of ribbands and souvenirs, cakes and drink, stood silent as he passed before them. The flutes, citterns and cymbals, the melodic voices of the minstrels, picked up the brooding death chanson:

"Farewell my friends, the tyde abideth no man,
I am departed from hence, and so shall ye;
But in this passage the best songe that I can
Is requiem eternam...."

The walk around the arena was an eternity, and then it was over and done with, and he had mounted his pedestal.



A low crescendo, like the roll of faraway surf, swept across the stands. Ann was at the edge of the platform. She stepped out of her slippers, unfastened the velvet

robe, handed it to one of the jailers. The crescendo grew, matching the surge of blood in Jacques' temples. A breeze swept the translucent death gown tight against her bare body, and she walked steadily down the steps, across the arena. Her feet stirred little puffs of grey dust that twisted and whirled away. The friar followed a few paces behind. At the pedestal, he offered her his hand. She refused it, stepped up without assistance. Bowing his head, the friar walked back to the judge's platform.

Jacques' squire and a page boy appeared almost immediately. They walked part way across the arena together. Each bore one of the pistols on a black satin pillow. At the edge of the execution circle, their paths forked toward each of the pedestals. The trembling page offered Ann her pistol first.

"Do ye remember your instructions?" he asked in a quavering voice that was picked up for the vidcast by the microphone hung under his frock.

"Yes, thank you."

Ann held the pistol loosely at her side, and looked toward Jacques, across the abyss of sixty feet.

With frozen fingers, Jacques accepted the other pistol from his squire, and knew that he was out beyond the point of no returning.

But he did not, could not, know what he would do once the signal for the execution was given. "Do not fail me again," Ann had pleaded. But what had she meant? Even at this final moment her smile was as enigmatic as ever.

The page and the squire retreated to their stations at the side of the arena, this time moving hastily.

The Bailiff raised his black staff and pennant, held it poised until the Chief Justice nodded, then lowered it with a flourish. A trumpet sounded one high, clear note.

The signal had been given.

Jacques remained motionless, waiting for a sign from Ann. But she, too, waited, her chin slightly lifted. What was she waiting for? What did she expect from him?

In the stands, the breathing of a hundred thousand people was a rasping sound.

And then Ann moved, so quickly that the surprise was complete. Her pistol flashed up, fired while still in its arc. The bullet blasted the air beside Jacques' ear, so close that for a fraction of a second he thought he had been hit.

Ann's voice drifted across to him, across the stunned silence, and it contained both a taunt and a plea:

"I won't miss next time, Jacques!"

And he knew she would not. He had seen too many guns fired not to recognize technique. If she had learned to shoot that well, there was no doubt she could have hit him the first time.

Jacques still couldn't fathom her motive, but there was no longer any chance to consider it. His conscious mind wanted to let her fire again, to put an end to this terrible dream. But the instinct of self-preservation was too strong; the lessons at the FBIT academy had been taught too well. Numbness went out of him, and he watched her eyes for the telltale flicker that would give a split-second warning of her next move.

The warning came, and he was ahead of it. His shot struck Ann high on the right shoulder. Her second and last bullet ploughed into the dust midway between them. She twisted around from the force of the impact, and half slipped, half fell from the pedestal. But she kept herself erect, bracing against the pedestal with her left hand. A red blotch was spreading from her shoulder to her breast and down her side. There was shock and pain in her eyes, but the half-smile was still on her lips.

"Une!" shouted the crowd, counting his first shot.

Jacques no longer needed a will of his own. The momentum of a thousand deaths swept him along, overpowering everything else.

"Deux!" screamed the hundred thousand voices. "Deux! Deux!"

His second shot struck Ann well below the left shoulder, knocking her away from the support of the pedestal, sprawling her in the dust. Yet so indomitable was her will that she brought her hands together and raised herself to her knees. Her entire upper body was covered with dust and spreading fingers of crimson.

"Trois!" shrieked the maddened crowd. "Trois! Trois!"

Women tore away pieces of their clothing and waved them with savage abandon.

"Trois! Trois! Trois!"

The third shot could barely be heard. Ann was lifted from her knees and hurled backwards. She rolled over twice, then lay face downward, her fingers digging in the hard earth.

With his last shot, the fierceness drained out of Jacques. He blinked like a man awakening from a horrible dream. He stared at Ann's shuddering body, not believing he could have done this. He cried out to her, and ran to her side with great, lunging steps. His body shook with dry sobs.

He turned her over tenderly, smoothed back the tangled hair from her forehead, tried to wipe some of the dirt and bubbles of red from her lips.

An FBIT man rushed toward them with a microphone. With one terrible look, Jacques sent him scurrying back.

"Ann ... Ann ..." he cried. "What have I done?"

Her glazing, pain-filled eyes cleared for a moment, and drew him closer. In them, for all the pain, there was peace at last. No reproach, no disappointment. Only peace. And he knew then, what he should always have known: That when a man lived as one with Death, he could not give less to any person, nor expect more.

Ann's fingers crawled through the dust and touched the toe of his boot. Her quivering lips twisted in a final grimace of ecstasy. And out of the lonely void of the dying came the words he had always hoped to hear, and would never hear again:

"Good night," she whispered. "You—were wonderful—my lover—my husband."

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