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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAST BRAVE INVADER ***

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THE LAST BRAVE INVADER

BY CHARLES L. FONTENAY

*In youth Lauria was beautiful,
proud, unattainable. But when
autumn came, she changed her
code and lowered her defense.*

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Lauria Swept down the spiral staircase in regal dignity, and wished there were someone there to witness her entrance. She walked across the parlor to the gun-rack and strapped a holstered pistol to her hip, just above the rustling flare of the full skirt of her evening dress.

The green sun's slanting rays in the parlor window told her it was late afternoon, nearly time to get started. She went to the full-length mirror. Beside the mirror hung the framed copy of the Constitution of Pamplin, hand-lettered on parchment. In bold red letters it proclaimed:

We, the people of Pamplin, hold that:

- 1. No government is the best government.*
- 2. A man's home is his castle.*
- 3. A woman's rights are equal to a man's rights.*
- 4. Only the brave deserve the fair.*

Lauria looked in the mirror, almost fearfully.

She saw with approval the breadth of her hips, the erectness of her shoulders. With more reluctance, her eyes rose to her face. There was still beauty there, she told herself, to the discerning eye. That touch of slackness to the jaw, that faint hollowness of cheek: those were no doubt exaggerated by the dimness of the

room.

In a table drawer, Lauria found jars and tubes. From them she carefully filled in a fuller form for her mouth, dabbed heavily at her cheeks, touched up her eyes, smeared over her jawline. She fluffed out the thinning blond hair and donned a light scarf then she removed the heavy bars from the front door. She went out, and locked its triple locks behind her. She gazed around cautiously and stepped lightly down the gravelled path. Around the house, the grounds were a solid mass of blooming flowers. Lauria had plenty of time to spend in the garden. The baskets and other handicraft articles that were her means of income left her a good deal of leisure, and cooking and household chores were routine and brief.

Farther from the house, the grounds looked better kept than they were. It was fortunate that the blue grass of the planet Pamplin grew short and neat, for Lauria never would have been able to keep the ten acres of her property trimmed. But the big trees that shaded the grounds had dropped twigs and leaves that she wouldn't clear away until the big effort of the fall clean-up.

The path curved down past a small cleared area in which a dozen upright wooden markers were spaced in rows. This was the cemetery.

She paused to look out across the neat rows of markers. There were men buried there. Twelve young men. They had died by her hand, in accordance with the Constitution and the law.

At one end of the cemetery stood a large wooden plaque on which she had carved the Constitution of Pamplin. Many times had her mother explained the meaning of the Constitution to Lauria, when Lauria was a little girl and still intruding on her mother's privacy.

"The people who colonized Pamplin left Earth many years ago because there they always had to sacrifice some of their individual rights to some government," her mother had said. "There are many kinds of governments, but all of them try to regulate people. And to regulate people, they have to invade people's privacy.

"The people of Pamplin came to this world because we don't want any government. We believe that every man and woman should have his individual right to do as he pleases, without other people bothering him."

"But what does No. 4 mean, Mother?" Lauria had asked. "*Only the brave deserve the fair?*"

"That means," replied her mother, for Lauria was fourteen and deserved to know these things, "that a woman on Pamplin is not subservient to the whims of men. No man may approach her and take her in his arms unless he has fought his way through the defenses of her home. Then they may agree to share the home, if they wish, but no woman of any character will permit a man to do this until he has proved his valor by fighting his way to her."

"Then my father must have been a brave man, wasn't he, Mother?"

"Yes, he was, my dear," said her mother, smiling tenderly. "He was very persuasive, too."

Lauria never saw her father, and no other man invaded the privacy of her mother's home while she lived there. Two men tried, and Lauria remembered the tense stirrings about the darkened house in the dead of night, the flash and roar of the guns, and her frightened glimpses of the men her mother had shot down as they tried to break in.

Her father must have been very courageous, Lauria thought. She constructed a handsome picture of her father in her mind, and dreamed of the day a handsome man like he would conquer her, when she lived in her own home.

Lauria's mother had some property on which she wanted Lauria to build a house, but Lauria was impatient. Even though her mother would hire men from town, Lauria would have to do much of the work herself and it would take years. So at sixteen, Lauria got her a house, ready-built.

She crept past the defenses of one of the best homes in the area. She broke into the house at night and killed the defender, a tired old man, in a blazing gun battle. The house became her home, and she improved its defenses.

Her ownership of the house, and her manner of taking it, gave her an immediate social standing far above that of her mother. She knew that she was envied: the bright-haired, beautiful young woman who held the ramparts of the big house and challenged all comers to conquer her.

There were men who tried, and the first nearly succeeded. Even now, after many

years, she could remember Poll's youthful, arrogant face, his lazy smile. They had met in the market place.

"An attractive spitfire, if ever I saw one," he had said to her. "Would you surrender to my arms, pretty one?"

"If you're strong enough to come and take me," she challenged, fire singing in her blood.

And that night he had come. In the starlight she fired from her windows at the shadowy figure that flitted among the bushes and trees, and powder smoke hung heavy in the air. It was after several hours and a long silence, when she thought he had given up and gone away, that he almost surprised her.

She was crouching in the parlour, waiting for the dawn, when there was a slight noise behind her. She whirled, whipping up her gun, and he was coming toward her swiftly and silently from the hall, a smile of triumph on his handsome face.

He was holding out his arms for her and there was no weapon in his hand when she shot him down.

She wept for a long time over his fair body, and knew to her shame that she had wanted him to conquer. Then she took him out and buried him beneath the grass. His grave was the first one, and behind it later she erected the wooden plaque bearing the words of the Constitution of Pamplin.

Others had tried, and their graves were here, with Poll's. And the years had passed, and no man had overrun the defenses of Lauria's house.

The frost of autumn was in her veins now as she looked at the graves of twelve young men, who had been young and eager in the years when she had been young. Slowly she turned away, went out the barred front gate of her property and waited for the crowd of merry-makers she would accompany to the party in town.

The music reverberated gaily amid the rafters of the huge community hall. At one end a fire blazed merrily in a big fireplace. Young couples, and their elders, danced variations of the steps that had been brought from Earth generations ago.

No one wore weapons here. although every person in the hall had worn or

carried a gun on the way here. The guns were checked at the entrance, and the doors were barred against any lawless raider.

Here, as in the market daily, people congregated. Here they were people and not individuals.

Outside, between here and their homes, they were individuals again, but still friendly, if wary. They carried their arms, they were careful of their language, they watched the people around them for signs of aggression. Outside was a code of conduct that was different from the sociable code inside, a code that condoned a duel over an insult, that recognized robbery, rape and even death if one were caught unarmed and alone.

And in their homes ... well, there was Cholli Rikkard. He was one-armed because of a wound he had suffered conquering Fanni in her home. Cholli had been a gay fellow who had stormed house after house of pretty women before, but after that he settled down with Fanni and they now had five children. They shared their privacy, but half a dozen times Cholli had stayed up all night fighting off those who would invade it.

The strange thing was that one or more of those who had sought to invade Cholli's home and take his wife and house from him might be dancing here tonight, perhaps chatting amiably with Cholli. Cholli might even know them for the attackers. Here they were all friends, suspending their cherished privacy for weekly companionship.

Lauria was one of those who sat among the oldest, and talked unhappily with those on either side of her. It was not that she was that old, for she wasn't. It was that Lauria's home now had the reputation of a deadly, unassailable fortress, and few men cared even to dance with her. It was that they feared her, she told herself as she sat there after only two dances.

"Care to dance this one, Miss Lauria?"

She looked up, startled. It was Cholli Rikkard, smiling at her, holding out his one arm apologetically.

She arose, gratefully, and took his hand. She and Cholli were old friends. Perhaps it was the sympathy of the handicapped for the handicapped: the man with only one arm for the woman with (perhaps?) too much stern pride.

"Tell me something, Cholli," said Lauria as they danced. "Is it true that many women deliberately allow men to invade their privacy?"

He looked at her blandly.

"That would be a violation of the Constitution, Lauria," he said.

"I know it would," she said impatiently. "But do they?"

"I've heard rumours."

"I've heard rumours, too, but I want the truth. You know the truth, Cholli. You conquered quite a few women before Fanni shot you in the arm."

He grinned.

"Fanni always was a poor shot," he said. "Or maybe she's a better shot than I think. Yes, Lauria, it's true. The Constitution is the law, and it's right in principle, but you have to face facts. If men and women adhered to the letter of the law in ... well, sex ... Pamplin would be depopulated by now. I thought everybody knew that."

"I didn't," said Lauria miserably. "I suspected.... I'd heard a lot of talk. But ... well, tell me, Cholli, how is it done? How do men know, I mean, when a woman is going to wink at the Constitution and let a man enter her home without fighting his way in?"

"It depends, Lauria. I suppose most often a woman has an understanding with a certain man and he gives some sort of signal when he comes to her house, so he won't be shot. Some women—quite a few, it is—just sort of let it be known around that they won't shoot if a man comes around. That's more dangerous, though, and they have to be on guard."

"I'd think so," said Lauria indignantly. "Another woman could take advantage of something like that and make a good haul."

There was a silence. Then Cholli said sily:

"Did you want to get a message to some man—or get the word around that...?"

"Certainly not!" she retorted firmly. "I abide by the Constitution, and I value my privacy."

"Okay, Lauria. I just thought I could get the word passed for you." He grinned. "If it weren't for this bum arm, I might have tried for you myself before now."

The music stopped and they parted.

"Wait, Cholli!" cried Lauria in a low intense voice. He turned and came back to her, looking at her quizzically.

"Cholli," she said, almost in a whisper, "pass the word around tonight that no young man will find my home defended!"

She turned her back quickly, her face flaming, and left the hall, picking up her scarf and gun at the door. She walked home alone, swiftly, holding up the hem of her skirt with her left hand and hoping savagely that someone would try to waylay her.

It was midnight when the alarm bell sounded.

Lauria had been sitting in the parlor, with no light but that of the fire, a hot drink in her hand, lost in turbulent thoughts.

Her thoughts twisted slightly. Had she made it plain to Cholli that only young men would be welcome?

But how could she toss aside everything in which she had believed for so long, on an impulse? Would she not redeem herself by shooting down any invader?

Shame was upon her now, for having told Cholli what she did. It was not the perverse shame that had run hot in her that night when she had fought Poll and wanted to be defeated, but the shame of having done what she scorned other women for doing.

But Lauria was lonely now, and the fire was not as warm as it once had been. How many years had it been—ten? fifteen?—since the last young man had won her outer wall, only to fall beneath her bullets in the moon-shadows?

Could she turn now to the ways of other women. to dissemble. to shoot wide of

Could she turn now to the ways of other women, to deception, to shoot him on the mark and put up a false defense? Could she now betray the weapons that had served her so well and true?

Or would there be a thirteenth grave in the little cemetery on the morrow?

The bell chattered nervously.

She arose and threw ashes on the fire. A weariness was in her bones. She took a gun from the rack and made the rounds of the house, checking the locks of doors and windows.

All was secure. More lithely, like a pantheress, she went from window to window, looking out, her gun ready. Some of the old wine of battle quickened in her blood.

The moon was bright, and the trees stood in great pools of shadow on the grounds. The bushes stood like dark, bulky sentinels.

At last she saw him, a moving shadow against the still shadows, creeping closer to the house. Her gun came up and she took aim, carefully, through the barred window. Her hands were as cold as ice on the gunstock.

For a moment he was still, and she lost him against the shadows. Then he moved again.

Her gun blossomed roaring flame and its stock kicked against her shoulder.

The shadow leaped, became a man as it fled across a path of moonlight. He was young, and he was smiling toward the window. Then he was swallowed up in the deeper shadows.

For a moment she was aghast, unbelieving. She had missed! Then, like a frigid hand clutching her heart, came the realization: deliberately, without conscious volition, she had pulled the gun muzzle aside when she fired.

She leaned against the wall, weak and perspiring. It was true, then. She yearned so deeply for a man, she so feared the age that crept up on her, that the principles of the Constitution no longer held real meaning for her.

She did not seek to fire again. She knelt on the floor by the window and waited, looking listlessly into the embers of the fire across the room. She felt suspended

looking listlessly into the embers of the fire across the room. She felt suspended in a nightmare.

She heard the crack as the lock was broken on a window in the rear of the house, and still she did not stir. But her heart began beating faster, a cold beating that did not warm her body. She began to shiver uncontrollably.

She heard the soft, wary footsteps as he came through the house. In the dimness, she saw his bulk come through the parlor door. A black veil passed momentarily before her eyes, and her gun slipped from lax fingers and fell to the floor with a clatter.

He leaped to one side, and the glow of the dying fire glinted from his weapon.

But she stood up against the window, in the moonlight, and spread her hands so he could see she was no longer armed.

"I am helpless," she said in a voice that nearly choked her. "I cannot resist your taking me for your love."

His laugh boomed out in the rich darkness, and she could see that he did not lower his weapon.

"Have no fear of that, old woman," he said. "I'm only going to put you out and take your house."

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